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**Community Development Initiatives as part of a**  
**tourism resort's CSR strategy:**  
**Examination of a high-end luxury resort in the Maldives**

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the requirement for the degree of

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## **Abstract**

The tourism industry has been promoted as a beacon of hope to help develop emerging countries and rural areas. This aligns well with the idea that the private sector can play a role in addressing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by being more directly involved in development. The most commonly used development tool for companies is corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes. This study explores those CSR activities of a resort in the Maldives that are intended to bring about improvements to the overall well-being of the local population. Such projects can be termed 'Corporate Community Development' (CCD) (Banks et al., 2016). The aim was to investigate which CCD initiatives the resort is conducting and to what extent the local community is an active partner in the process. The focus hereby is weighted towards the point of view of the local population to counteract the overwhelming majority of CSR analyses from a business perspective.

Primary data was collected through a grey literature analysis of reports and websites, as well as semi-structured interviews with resort and community representatives. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, no international travel was possible, and the conversations were conducted using online communication tools. The data was coded and analysed using thematic analysis and then put into perspective applying the Development First approach (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016) as a theoretical framework.

The results of the study showed that the resort is highly committed to sustainable practices and socially responsible behaviour which is rooted deeply in their company philosophy. However, the results also aligned with the insights of previous studies that most tourism businesses focus primarily on sustainability in an ecological sense. Furthermore, the findings show that while both sides are content with the partnership, which both sides describe as equal, there is a need to improve the communication between the resort and communities and to establish more defined processes of reporting as well as monitoring and evaluation.

*Key words:* corporate community development, corporate social responsibility, Maldives, sustainable tourism, community perspective, private sector development, SDGs

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## **Abbreviations**

CCD	Corporate Community Development
CEM	Community Engagement Manager
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN	United Nations

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Research Background and Rationale**

As governments and international development institutions are failing to eliminate poverty and stop climate change, increasing attention has been given to the private sector's involvement in development. The latest example for the trend of inclusion of the private sector is the Sustainable Development Agenda. Many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can only be achieved through intensive cooperation of all actors, including the private sector. Statements such as “a call on all businesses to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges” (United Nations, 2015, para. 67), or “an historic opportunity to scale up and align business efforts in order to contribute to United Nations priorities at unprecedented levels” (UN Global Compact, 2013, p. 2), underline the aspirations for a good partnership. This can happen through immanent development as well as intentional development (Cowen & Shenton, 1996). While the former are side effects of a company's capital activities (e.g. employment), the latter are additional active development initiatives (e.g. donations). The most common tool of intentional development has become corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Despite having been around for a while, CSR is still a highly contested topic among scholars and development professionals. The most common counter-argument is what Friedmann once famously argued that the private sector's business is its business (Ramanna, 2020) and therefore companies will always act primarily for their own benefit. Apart from this general criticism, there are other voices of warning that point to things such as a lack of expertise, dependencies, or unequal power relations (Blowfield & Dolan, 2010; Mawdsley et al., 2018; McEwan et al., 2017). These critiques are also relevant to a newer term for development initiatives by private sector actors: Corporate Community Development (CCD) (Banks et al., 2016). CCD looks across core and non-core business practices covering all actions that aim to enhance the well-being of the local community. Some of these activities might just be for the community, such as building a new classroom, whereas others might benefit the community while also delivering business operations, for example, staff cross-training or procurement of local products. While CSR initiatives are often conducted in other parts of the world, CCD ensures to give back to the communities directly surrounding



the business. As these activities by definition have a deep impact on the daily life of communities, it is important not only to involve community members in every step of the process but also to focus on their perspectives and wishes.

The tourism industry has repeatedly been praised as providing a great opportunity for the development of poor and rural areas (Mowforth & Munt, 2016; UNWTO, 2017). Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are particularly interesting in this respect, as the tourism industry often represents a large part of their economic income (Shakeela et al., 2011). Additionally, island states' geographical conditions pose a range of unique development challenges. In SIDS such as the Maldives where many small islands are scattered across a large area of the sea, the central government often seems far away or absent. In cases like this, the local population might turn their gaze to the closer private businesses for development support (McLennan & Banks, 2019). At the same time, the flat and sandy nature of the islands makes them vulnerable to climate change (Kothari, 2014). For the above reasons, many policies exist for resorts in the Maldives to conduct CSR. To determine if the tourism businesses make a real impact, or are merely offsetting the negative repercussions of their neoliberal activities, more practical case studies of actual examples need to be conducted (Eun Yeon & Atkinson, 2019; Holcomb et al., 2010). Coles et al. (2013) see a particular deficit in studies on social development initiatives in developing countries.

This study focuses on the intersection of development, tourism by examining the community development activities of a resort in the Maldives. It follows the call of McLennan and Banks (2019) to “reverse the lens” and tries to understand the activities from the communities' perspective. The Development First framework by Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) will help to analyse the findings. As the involvement of the community is an important factor for successful community development, the resort's activities will be investigated with special attention to the extent of the community's agency in the decision-making, implementation, and monitoring process.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Questions**

The research has one main aim:

**Aim:** To explore the effectiveness of community development practices by a high-end luxury resort in the Maldives and to understand the extent of the community's involvement in these initiatives.

This aim will be examined through two research questions:

**Question 1:** To what extent is the targeted community an active partner in the decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation process of community development?

**Question 2:** Does the resort follow a Development First or a Tourism First approach (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016) with its initiatives?

## **1.3 Chapter Outline**

*Chapter One*, 'Introduction' has presented a topic overview which explains the background and rationale of this study. It has indicated a need for more research on practical examples of corporate community development in the tourism sector from a community perspective. The selection of a case study in the Maldivian tourism industry will provide relevant analysis regionally as well as for other island states and will add to the wider debate about private sector-led community development. The chapter finishes with the research aim and questions and an outline of the other chapters.

*Chapter Two*, 'Tourism Businesses use of CSR to benefit local communities' provides background knowledge through a thorough literature review. The review presents a theoretical basis of current and important literature connected to the research's topic. Moving from the general to the specific it outlines the private sectors increasing involvement in development aid, the pros and cons of CSR as a tool for development, and the hope which has been put in the tourism industry in this context. The literature points to the need for the incorporation of local context and the possibility for local people to engage to achieve sustainable development outcomes. The last section introduces the Development First approach by Hughes and Scheyvens which frames the findings of this study.

*Chapter Three*, ‘Methodology, Methods, and Data Sources’ explains the methodology of the study. It begins with a discussion about research theories and the chosen philosophy and methodology. The methods of data collection are documented, and the ethical considerations discussed. Grey literature analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data for this report and thematic analysis was applied to extract key schemes. The chapter closes with a section on how the data collection worked out in practice.

*Chapter Four*, ‘Soneva Fushi and the Maldivian Context’ describes and positions the Maldives, providing a basic overview of the socio-economic context, the geographical conditions and challenges, as well as the special importance of the tourism industry has for the island state. The unique concept of the country’s travel industry and its development over time are highlighted, as well also its difficulties and inequities.

*Chapter Five*, ‘Research Findings’, presents the findings of the research extracted from the conducted interviews as well as the grey literature analysis. It outlines the development and implementation process of community development initiatives described by the interview participants. The rationale is to answer research question 1 by highlighting factors that relate to the participation of the local population in the process of decision-making, implementation, and monitoring in the process of community development projects.

*Chapter Six*, ‘Discussion and Conclusion’ reflects on the results that have emerged from the study in relation to broader academic theory and findings. Furthermore, research question 2 is answered by positioning the resort on the spectrum of Tourism First to Development First (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016). The findings encourage more socially-oriented projects and talk about the need for more effective communication strategies as well as monitoring and evaluation processes. The chapter ends with future research recommendations and a final conclusion.

## **2 Tourism Businesses use of CSR to benefit local communities**

This chapter will give an overview of relevant and current literature related to the thesis' topic and aim. It begins by describing the involvement of the private sector in global development work and then goes into more detail about the concept of CSR as one of the most widely used development tools by private companies. After more detailed definitions and weighing the pros and cons of CSR, the concept is examined in relation to tourism and community development. Finally, the last section focuses on the inclusion of local voices in such initiatives. The most important findings of the chapter are then presented in the summary.

### **2.1 Private Sector in Development**

The private sector has been increasingly moved into the spotlight of development discourse. Big international development institutions such as the United Nations (UN) or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have pointed out that private businesses are essential in the fight against poverty, famines, climate change and other development challenges of our time (OECD, 2011; United Nations, 2008). A recent prominent example highlighting the essential role of the private sector in global development is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda launched in 2015. The 17 goals emphasise at many points how the private sector can deliver the set targets alongside non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments (UNDP, 2020b). The SDGs were the most recent proof that the large development institutions are counting on the support of private companies.

However, the efforts of the UN to hold companies more accountable for their actions and involve them further in development aid started much earlier. Already in 1999 in Davos at the World Economy Forum, the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, urged the attending managers to “initiate a global compact of shared values and principles, which will give a human face to the global market” (Annan, 1999, 0:47). His speech was the start of the UN Global Compact initiative which was launched a year later and today includes about 16,000 businesses around the world which aspire to proactively uphold human rights, decent labour and environmental standards (UN Global Compact, 2021). A decade later the International Organisation for

Standardization released *ISO 26000 Social Responsibility* which was developed by approximately 360 experts from almost 100 different countries over six years. ISO 26000 is supposed to give guidance to any organisation that wants to contribute to a more sustainable world (ISO, 2018). The promotion of partnership between the private sector, governments and civil society continued at events such as the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan as well as the 2012 Rio+20 United Nations Global Compact summit and found its latest peak in the SDGs.

The reasoning of those who support the involvement of the private sector in global development is diverse. The UN made clear that many of the 17 SDGs can only be achieved through coordinated international action from all sectors. For example, the achievement of SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth is entirely dependent on the commitment of private enterprises (UN, 2021). Others like SDG 12 *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns* are at least partially in the hands of the private sector. For many, the most important contribution of the private sector is financial support. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2020b) lists “unlock private finance for the SDGs” (p. 6) as one of three priorities of its private sector strategy. Sachs (2015), who was involved in the development of the SDGs, dedicated a whole paper to the difficulty of financing the agenda. He emphasises that the vast majority of the needed investments will have to be channelled through the private sector. Whereas Sachs thinks that the private sector should be “steered” (p. 276) through public institutions and development agencies, others hope that the private sector takes on a more leading role. This hope is based on the idea that the rigour and management skills of corporations will bring more efficiency into the development landscape. For instance, this argument was used by the Canadian International Development Agency to justify their substitutions for the Canadian extractive industry (Brown, 2016). In the same paper Brown outlines that there are some advantages for the companies to enter into cooperation with the state ministries of development. He writes that “...funding allows them to scale up their CSR program ... to claim credit and get positive publicity...” (p. 280). On the same note, the ISO 26000 guidance paper lists prominently the benefits that social responsibility can bring to a business. Next to the competitive advantages and reputation it also mentions the “maintenance of employee morale, commitment and productivity” (ISO, 2018, p. 5). The causality between employee commitment and customer satisfaction has already been shown elsewhere

(Ramkissoon et al., 2020). To put it in a nutshell, advocates see many benefits for the development sector from greater private sector involvement. To motivate them to cooperate, they are not afraid to advertise the advantages that the individual company can derive from it.

Nevertheless, all the supporting voices are also countered by those who are critical of development aid by private companies. Conversely to the argument for the private sector's rigour and management skills, Schaaf (2015) argues that more actors do not necessarily mean more efficiency. The reality of partnerships often differs extremely from the somewhat idealistic idea. She points out that the base of a good partnership lies in a common goal but that in most development projects each actor has its own interests and follows its own agenda. The possibility that companies may not be acting primarily altruistically, given the many benefits they can derive from it, cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. From this, critiques conclude that development has just become another tool in the hand of neoliberal capitalists (Hart, 2001; Martine, 2015). Here it is worthwhile mentioning a fundamental difference between the private and the public sector. Unlike the public sector, which is accountable towards all citizens who pay taxes and can vote, the public sector is only held accountable to its shareholders, customers and some might argue, its employees (Mawdsley, 2015; McEwan et al., 2017). This makes the private sector an unpredictable and less reliant partner as the support from its few stakeholders for development initiatives can be lost quickly.

Over time, there has been a call for companies to move beyond sustainability and social activities that are reduced to their core business. The way the Global Compact and ISO 26000 are addressing the manner of how companies run their business is seen as not enough anymore. For a clear differentiation between the way a corporation is conducting its business versus its additional development initiatives this research will make use of Cowen and Shenton's (1996) distinction of immanent and intentional development.

According to Cowen and Shenton (1996), immanent development is the unintended effects of conducting one's work (e.g. a hotel might employ a young woman to be a receptionist; this might help to empower her and enhance her family's wellbeing because of her access to income), whereas intentional development is initiated through an actual conscious decision (e.g. a hotel might provide books for a library in a nearby

school in an impoverished neighbourhood). Morse (2008) presents the following definition based on their work:

1. Immanent development (or what people are doing anyway): a broad process of change in human societies driven by a host of factors including advances in science, medicine, the arts, communication, governance etc.
2. Intentional (or interventionist) development: a focussed and directed process whereby government and nongovernment organizations implement projects and programmes to help develop the under-developed. (p. 341)

Historically, the private sector mostly provided immanent development such as creating jobs, improving infrastructure, and providing training. But those positive repercussions are often accompanied by negative impacts like ecological degradation, migration, and even social conflicts (McEwan et al., 2017; McLennan & Banks, 2019; Morse, 2008). Companies like to take credit for positive developments connected to their business, however, they rarely take responsibility for the negative impacts it has (McLennan & Banks, 2019). This becomes all the more devastating if it is to be believed that even immanent development can be influenced to a certain degree (Morse, 2008). On the other hand, Escobar (1996) argues that every time corporations try to influence their immanent development by making their business model more sustainable it is a trade-off for economic gain.

Since it was historically only carried out by the public sector and NGOs, Morse's (2008) definition of intentional development does not encompass the private sector yet. Aid agencies or NGOs would implement and execute professionally planned development projects funded by governments or donations from the public and philanthropists. However, through the above-mentioned conferences and initiatives, the private sector has been officially invited to take part in intentional development actions, too. This leads us to Corporate Social Responsibility which has become the most popular example of intentional development for private companies.

## **2.2 The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

The famous economist Milton Friedman (2007) not only wrote the famous statement "a business' business is its business" but even more clearly concerning CSR published an article named 'The social responsibility of business is to increase its profit'. The article discourages companies from undertaking intentional philanthropic projects

because, in the long run, all parts of society will benefit most if the companies concentrate exclusively on being economically successful. Contrary to Friedman's understanding, however, CSR has developed and established itself as an important, independent management discipline. Around the same time as Friedman's article, Votaw (1972), an American professor with an interest in the modern social and political role of business published an article which states "[CSR] means something, but not always the same thing, to everybody" (p.25). While there is disagreement as to whether Friedman's idea is still valid (Orlitzky, 2015; Ramanna, 2020), today's academic literature tends to align with Votaw's statement (Chilufya, 2017; Holcomb et al., 2010; Shareef et al., 2014). There is a continuous disagreement about the definition as well as the meaning of CSR.

Instead of one universal definition, all those who study it find that there are a plethora of different descriptions, often with a bias towards one particular stakeholder group (van Marrewijk, 2003) or a focus on either environmental, social or economic factors (Dahlsrud, 2008). One of the earliest definitions was written down by Bowen (1953): "[CSR] refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (p. 6). It was here that the first foundations for the CSR concept were laid. Bowen is today considered the forefather of CSR and with his publication strongly influenced the modern understanding of social responsibility (Schultz, 2011).

In the nineties, empirical research emerged, which was less concerned with the discussion of terms but focused on the practical implementation of CSR. Concrete theories like Carroll's pyramid of responsibilities came up (Carroll, 1979). This often-cited concept consists of four levels of responsibility, which build on each other. The first level is formed by the 'economic responsibilities' and thus describes that the basis of all corporate activities as being economically successful. The second level comprises the 'legal responsibilities', i.e., compliance with local and international legal provisions, while the third level focuses on the 'ethical responsibilities' requiring ethical and fair corporate actions. The fourth and last level is what Carroll calls 'philanthropic responsibilities'. This describes the social commitment of a company in accordance with the common good of society (Carroll, 1979). The first two levels must be adhered to secure the existence of a company. The third level is not mandatory, but



necessary to be socially accepted. He argues that the last level, on the other hand, can be pursued voluntarily by companies.

One could dispute that nowadays philanthropic action is not quite as voluntary anymore since expectations of companies have changed considerably. The increased willingness of consumers to inform themselves about the sustainability of products and their growing sense of injustice has put companies under pressure (Kummer, 2009). Social media and other information technology make it much easier to inform oneself and they give NGOs the means and a stage to bring corporate missteps and misconduct into the public eye (McLennan & Banks, 2019). These are reasons why recently the CSR discourse has shifted from the question of whether it should be practiced to how to implement, maintain and measure it (Silvestre et al., 2018). However, even with the new focus, no universal definition has been found. All definitions still differ widely between perspective and focus. In short, it seems that companies can decide for themselves how to define and shape CSR.

To add to the confusion, there are several other concepts in addition to CSR, some of which are used synonymously and are difficult to distinguish from each other. This includes, but is not limited to, social sustainability, corporate citizenship, company stakeholder responsibility, corporate social responsiveness, and triple bottom line (Coles et al., 2013; Hansen & Schrader, 2005; Holcomb et al., 2010; Silvestre et al., 2018). In an attempt to bring a little more clarity into the discourse the World Bank defines CSR broadly as “the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community, and society at large to improve the quality of life, in ways that are both good for business and good for development” (Fox et al., 2002, p. 1). For the purpose of this research report, CSR is going to be defined as ‘initiatives to which the investigated resort has committed financial and personnel resources to generate a positive impact on the people and the environment in addition to their core practices’. This is a specific definition framing the term CSR for the purpose of this research report only. It shall encompass all types of projects from capacity building to donations.

Those who advocate for CSR programmes often emphasise the mutual benefits business and society can derive from it. Globalisation has increased the competitive pressure on companies and differentiation by price/performance ratio is becoming increasingly

difficult due to identical or interchangeable products. Therefore, the comparative advantage must more often be driven by non-tangible corporate values such as an image. These discussions, mainly led from the business point of view, have also argued that CSR is a strategic concept that not only contributes to the competitiveness of a company but concurrently improves the well-being of the community in which it is active (Burke & Logsdon, 1996; Porter & Kramer, 2003, 2007). Porter and Kramer (1999) have coined the related concept of ‘shared value’, indicating that both businesses and society will profit mutually from well-implemented strategic CSR practices. Ashley and Haysom (2006) represent the point of view that society and the private sector need each other and see a moral obligation for businesses to give back to the population in which they operate.

The opposition, however, has depreciated the above pro-CSR arguments as myths from which mostly business elites’ profit (Mawdsley et al., 2018; Weidmann, 1990). In their eyes, the common benefits are an idealistic view which in reality will always be more to the detriment of the companies. Martine (2015) argues that companies use CSR programmes to merely offset their own negative impacts. Barkemeyer et al. (2014) call this the “business-poverty nexus” (p. 29) describing situations where companies try to rectify the development issues their own business actions created. Finally, it has been questioned whether, even if businesses implement CSR for all the right reasons, their development actions can ever be successful. After all, their expertise lies in making a profit and not development work. That is why Blowfield and Dolan (2010) and others are sceptical about companies ever being able to become successful development agents.

The above two paragraphs have shown that just as diverse as the terms and definitions are the opinions of scholars about the concept of CSR. In any case, criticism makes an important contribution to any scholarly discourse, as it provides impulses for improvement and keeps advocates in check to develop concepts further. If we want the private sector to be a real contributor to development, it will need to focus on more stakeholders than just the direct ones like employees or shareholders. This is where intentional development comes in and makes sure that more interest groups i.e., the local community profit from the business’ success. Whereas there is no doubt that such initiatives are increasing, there is no proof yet that they actually contribute to meaningful development and poverty reduction (Chilufya, 2017). The next section will

analyse what has been written in academic literature so far about CSR in the tourism industry and will hone in on community development initiatives.

### **2.3 CSR, the Tourism Industry, and Community Development**

The previous two sections have highlighted how globalisation has put companies under pressure to differentiate themselves from their competitors through sustainable social activities while at the same time the international development community is putting much hope into the private sector. The tourism industry is no exception to these trends. Particularly, the UN and the SDGs display tourism as a beacon of hope for underdeveloped countries (UNWTO, 2017). This and rising consumer expectations have led to tourism businesses increasingly investing in CSR (Coles et al., 2013; Holcomb et al., 2007; McEwan et al., 2017). This section will provide background information and results from other studies on CSR initiatives of tourism businesses and their contribution to community development.

The international tourism industry has undergone several image shifts from being seen as a tool for modernisation to an exploitative business destroying local culture, to a beacon of hope for development and poverty alleviation (Mowforth & Munt, 2016; Scheyvens, 2011b). In particular, the role of the private sector in contributing to development through tourism has been debated. A more hopeful commentator notes that,

Steps can be taken to increasingly involve the private sector in sustainable tourism development, tapping their expertise and interest in enhancing their own reputation as drivers for preservation of the culture, environmental and social sustainability and contribution to poverty reduction.

(Epler Wood & Leray, 2005, p.4)

Other advocates emphasise how the travel industry can help to expand economies, generate jobs, and bring in foreign investment (Dowling & Wood, 2017; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016). Their arguments have been further fuelled by the increasing share of tourist arrivals to developing countries (Shareef et al., 2014; UNWTO, 2020) and the strong connection between the SDGs and the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2017). Historically, these arguments build on immanent development which tourism has been delivering. Since the heightened sensibility of consumers for sustainable products also increasingly influences the vacation planning and booking process, tourism businesses

have continuously expanded their involvement into intentional development. “The public increasingly wants to know about the companies that stand behind brands and products presented to them. And to use their consumer power to reward ‘good’ companies and punish ‘bad’ ones” (Lewis, 2001, p. 32). Many vacation destinations are threatened by climate change and pollution or are situated in rural areas of less developed countries. The confrontation with these issues has led to an increasing number of consumers actively searching for tour operators and resorts that try to counteract the same. A large proportion of travellers want to enjoy their holidays and feel good about doing as little harm as possible to the environment and helping to ensure that the inhabitants and employees of the host country benefit appropriately from tourism (Universität Hamburg, 2008).

However, the positive view on the industry has been somewhat dampened in recent years because of the strong ramifications both of too many and too few tourist arrivals. The former has become known under the term ‘overtourism’. The pressure that masses of travellers put on local infrastructure and nature have prompted local populations around the world to revolt against the scope of their local tourism industry (Milano et al., 2019; Séraphin et al., 2020). Academics see cheap flights, the sharing economy and social media influencers as some of the main reasons for the no longer manageable quantities of tourists (Smiljanic, 2020). Although local residents of popular tourist destinations have been wishing for fewer tourist arrivals, the current pandemic has shown that the absence of tourists brings another range of problems with it. The almost complete global standstill has exposed the extreme dependence of whole economies but also personal fates on this one industry (Ray et al., 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2020).

While both the pandemic and overtourism illuminate social repercussions of tourism on the local population and their culture, traditionally the focus of travellers, researchers, as well as tourism businesses conducting CSR rested on the environmental implications of the industry (Butler, 1999; Neto, 2003; Scheyvens, 2011a). More recently, however, a rising number of academics have attempted to address this imbalance and focused on the social dimension of sustainable tourism (Chilufya, 2017; Mowforth & Munt, 2016; Scheyvens, 2011b). This applies significantly to the Maldives, where high vulnerability to climate change effects, like sea levels rising, has led to business as much as researchers mostly working on sustainability in an environmental sense (Kothari & Arnall, 2020). Over the past two decades, political

unrest and social inequalities within the island state have moved social aspects more into the focus of both groups (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2014; Kothari, 2014; Scheyvens, 2011a). Hereby, the reflections about the role and responsibilities of the private sector in social development and poverty alleviation have been a central component.

While these authors all endorse the increasing involvement of tourism businesses in development, they also sound a note of caution and see a need for more research. For example, Scheyvens (2011b) points out that the shift of the tourism industry to more sustainable business models is not necessarily altruistic. When considering all the benefits that companies achieve through sustainable behaviour this is not surprising and of course, tourism companies are in no way inferior to other industries in this respect. In a research project on CSR in the Maldives the questioned businesses, among which a majority were resorts, saw ‘clients’ loyalty’ as the main external benefit of CSR, with 68% of respondents saying this (Shareef et al., 2014).

Generally, critics claim that too little empirical evidence has been produced so far to prove that private sectors’ intentional development is actually positively contributing to sustainable development (Banerjee, 2007; Frynas, 2005; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016; Jenkins & Obara, 2006). Moreover, while some sectors like the extractive industry have been thoroughly investigated (Brown, 2016; Hamann, 2003; Jenkins & Obara, 2006), many scholars are particularly asking for more investigation of CSR programmes’ effectiveness in the tourism industry (Eun Yeon & Atkinson, 2019; Kang & Atkinson, 2016). In terms of the research that has been done, Coles et al. (2013) point out that most of it was conducted in developed countries and that studies focusing on social aspects fall far behind studies focusing on environmental factors.

Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) have shown that while in the global north tourism companies’ CSR programmes usually have a primary focus on their own practice and donations, in emerging economies they increasingly include direct development activities. These activities targeting local development were coined *corporate community development* (CCD) by Banks et al. (2016). As this is a relatively new term, once again there is no clear definition (McEwan et al., 2017; McLennan & Banks, 2019; Zeuner, 2020). CCD differs from CSR activities which are often completely unrelated to community development (e.g., carbon emission reduction or purchase of eco-products). Instead, CCD focuses only on initiatives that have a direct benefit for the

local population. Zeuner (2020) describes CCD in a general way but with a focus on a specific group of society as “practices that seek to improve the living conditions of marginalised and less privileged groups in communities” (p.22). Contradictory to that, Del Carlo (2004) defines community development as part of a CSR strategy with initiatives not just targeting one specific group of society but rather as a range of actions that are in no way connected to the business’ value chain. This report agrees with a broader understanding of CCD based on Hughes (2016). For Hughes, CCD includes all population groups and incorporates all corporate actions contributing to the wellbeing of the community, without limitation to any specific type. Hence, CCD is not limited to projects which supplement the day-to-day business of a company (as is usually the case with CSR) but also includes core business practices that are carried out ethically and responsibly. For instance, procurement of local goods, capacity building sessions, preferential employment, business mentoring or donations to local institutions can all be covered by the term CCD.

In relation to the motivations for corporate projects focusing on community development McEwan et al. (2017) summarise:

Corporations are engaging with community-led, development initiatives in a wide variety of contexts and ways, and with different motivations and goals .... In some cases, these initiatives are a result of legal obligations ...; in other cases [*sic*] they are a result of donor-led partnerships and programmes; elsewhere they reflect a ‘voluntary’ decision by a firm with motivations arising from a range of contexts and objectives. (p. 29)

Just like other CSR projects, community development is not purely altruistic but aims to bring mutual benefits to the business and the local society. To be surrounded by a prosperous community is desirable as it decreases disruptive activities such as begging, waste pollution or trespassing. Consequently, the need for community development is particularly important for hotel and lodge companies operating in tourism areas that border poor rural communities. Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) write, tourism companies located in poor areas “see a higher need to look after their neighbours, both because this enhances their reputation ... and because it decreases the likelihood of disruptions to the business by disgruntled ‘locals’” (p. 472). This is more important than ever since the behaviour of many tourists during their holidays has changed simultaneously with higher demands towards sustainability practices. While in the past it was common to solely stay within a resort’s boundaries throughout a whole vacation,

today's travellers often seek a more authentic experience of the country and its local culture (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Excursions to nearby communities for the chance of getting a taste of local cuisine, art and lifestyle are high in demand and should be considered a part of the guests' experience package by the resorts.

In a largely dispersed island state like the Maldives, there is another argument for the intensive involvement of the private sector into community development: since they exist in close proximity, personnel within tourism businesses have a better insight into what the respective community might need than the governments and NGOs which are often situated far away in another region of the country (McLennan & Banks, 2019). Some local inhabited islands are often several sea miles away from the central government in Malé or even more regional councils while a resort might be situated on a neighbouring island. Banks et al. (2016) note that "where the state is largely absent ... corporations are expected to provide services and infrastructure" (p. 251).

Despite these supportive arguments, existing research is critical on how much positive impacts CCD has on long term development outcomes for the local community (Blowfield, 2007; Jenkins, 2005). While some scholars are very critical and suggest that companies introduce CCD solely to counter accusations of exploitation and destruction (McEwan et al., 2017), others claim they just want to deepen the goodwill and support within the local community towards their presence (Muthuri et al., 2012). The approval and goodwill of the local population, which is sometimes referred to as a "social licence to operate" (Harvey, 2014), is important for the company to run their business smoothly. These once again not so altruistic reasons are fuelling the same criticism which is also voiced against CSR: CCD is yet another pretentious western concept based on the idea of superiority. Hereby, the deep intervention in the everyday life and the social conditions of community development initiatives by companies that, are not development agencies increase the concerns of many opponents even further.

More positive voices try to constructively highlight currently existing constraints and give advice on how to overcome the same. Hughes (2016, p. 38) lists four significant factors which limit the potential for meaningful and sustainable CCD:

1. Self-regulation: companies often agree to accords to avoid external rules and regulations but do not priorities the agreed actions unless it coincides with their own interests.



2. Reporting and practice discrepancies: Gaps between reporting and actual practices of CSR have been found at many companies. A wide range of corporate policies are just in place to comply with legal requirements and even when CSR initiatives are conducted, they still contradict other core practices of the same business.
3. Scale and scope: Corporate development focuses more narrowly on issues directly connected to the business and less on broader challenges like human rights or social equality which development agents also focus on. At the same time, firms only spent a fraction of financial and personnel resources on CSR.
4. Reaching the poor: The poorest and most marginalised are seldomly reached by CSR practices, which rather enforce existing power structures.

These limitations make clear that companies need “to engage in processes of innovation where they adapt ideas, products, and processes that significantly benefit the business, the community stakeholders, and the wider society, as opposed to simply viewing community needs as opportunities to address core business issues...” (Muthuri, 2007, p. 372). This is why, to achieve the significant benefits, it is necessary to “reverse the lens” (McLennan & Banks, 2019) and have a look at CCD from the community’s perspective will be outlined in the next section.

## **2.4 Community Engagement and Local Voices in CSR**

The rationale for advancing the research on community perspectives to deepen understanding and improve practice is supported by the research up to now. It makes clear that a strong contradiction exists between the communities’ and the companies’ understanding of CSR. Therefore, CSR is not spared from the continuous argument of critics that development is a tool of the West (Escobar, 2012; Hart, 2001; Martine, 2015), “based on a set of assumptions over which those being ‘developed’ have no influence” (Morse, 2008, p. 342). The private sector’s development initiatives are rather seen as yet another pretentious western concept based on the idea of superiority. Shareef et al. (2014) point out that we must distinguish more clearly between ‘mainstream CSR’ and CSR in developing countries. She outlines that mainstream CSR has been invented in developed countries and therefore reflects their values and socio-economic



conditions. Developing countries, on the other hand, have a completely different set of values which the CSR strategies need to adapt or otherwise the corporations run the risk of being “trapped in hypocrisy and ‘window dressing’” (p. 88). Others have also argued that unless CSR strategies adapt and incorporate local context, they will fail to contribute to any sustainable development (Banerjee, 2007; Blowfield, 2007; Hamann, 2006; Idemudia, 2011).

For a long time, more local involvement and control over development have been suggested by academics in this context (Chambers, 1994; Morse, 2008). Research has proven that the engagement of local community members can furthermore help reduce dependency on outside development agents and build capacity (Jenkins & Obara, 2006). Considering that CSR projects targeting community development intervene particularly deeply in the lives of the local population this is especially relevant. Models of engagement take on many different shapes in practice, but the initial step identified in literature focusing on CCD is to generate a better understanding of the local community’s perception (McEwan et al., 2017; McLennan & Banks, 2019).

McEwan et al. (2017) and McLennan and Banks (2019), whom both have discovered a range of contradictions between the two perspectives, identified the definition of ‘community’ as the first step to rapprochement. Often solely defined by geographical limits the concept of community is much more complex. “‘The community’ is not a static given, but rather the outcome of some often highly politically charged processes” (McLennan & Banks, 2019, p.119). Its incorrect definition can lead to the uneven distribution of development aid (Idemudia, 2009) which again can result in conflict (McEwan et al., 2017).

The second step is for companies to realise that the immanent development from their operations often reaches further than they think and therefore beyond the defined community. None of the communities distinguishes between immanent and intentional development in the same way companies, or for that matter scholars, do. McLennan and Banks (2019) point out that “communities typically do not agree with the corporate preference to limit their responsibility for social transformation to those aspects they are connected to” (p.121). An example would be a corporation that takes credit for building a new extension to the local school complex because of the growing number of pupils but does not acknowledge its influence on migration streams coming to the

area straining the infrastructure and causing social tensions. The local community on the other hand sees these changes holistically as originating from the company.

A third aspect that differs in the company's and the population's perception is relationships. Whereas corporations put more emphasis on material benefits, communities in emerging economies are more interested in less tangible assets (McLennan & Banks, 2019). The difference could be attributed to the primarily western background of corporations used to operating in a neoliberal environment. In many cases, the cultural norms of the local population and the operational norms of the company differ substantially (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016). McEwan et al. (2017) bring an example from Fiji. There it is customary for chiefs to meet with other chiefs. So chiefs often wish to meet regularly with the general manager of a resort (the chief of the company if so to speak) that is located on customary land (which is leased from their clan) and are offended when this does not happen or when someone in a lower position is sent from the resort to communicate with them. While development practitioners and scholars have realised the importance of a good relationship between development staff and receiving communities, this is often new territory for corporations (McLennan & Banks, 2019).

While the importance of involving the recipients of development in the definition of goals and the process of implementation has already spread very well, this is not yet the case in the area of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of projects. It has been noted that even International NGOs "typically develop stronger formal accountability measures for donors and staff-members than for beneficiaries" (Kang et al., 2012, p.317). It then does not come as a surprise that in CSR accountability to the community always comes second behind accountability to shareholders and the head office (Hughes, 2016). However, involving the community both in the development and monitoring of indicators improves trustworthiness and enhances the credibility of findings (Holte-McKenzie et al., 2006). Furthermore, being part of the evaluation process builds analytic capacity of recipients to evaluate and determine their own needs and priorities for the future (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998).

This goes to show that there are great differences companies and communities have to overcome to create meaningful and sustainable CCD initiatives. The tendency to exclude community members from the various steps of the CSR process will not help

to advance rapprochement. Instead, the domination of CSR opportunities and outcomes by the corporations and a few powerful individuals happens continuously to the expense of the already disadvantaged and marginalised (Utting, 2007). Utting (2007) makes a case to establish spaces for dialogue and negotiation and introduce mechanisms for the local population to genuinely engage in development practice. The next chapter will outline which theoretical framework this research draws on to examine if the selected resort takes such actions.

## **2.5 The Development First Framework**

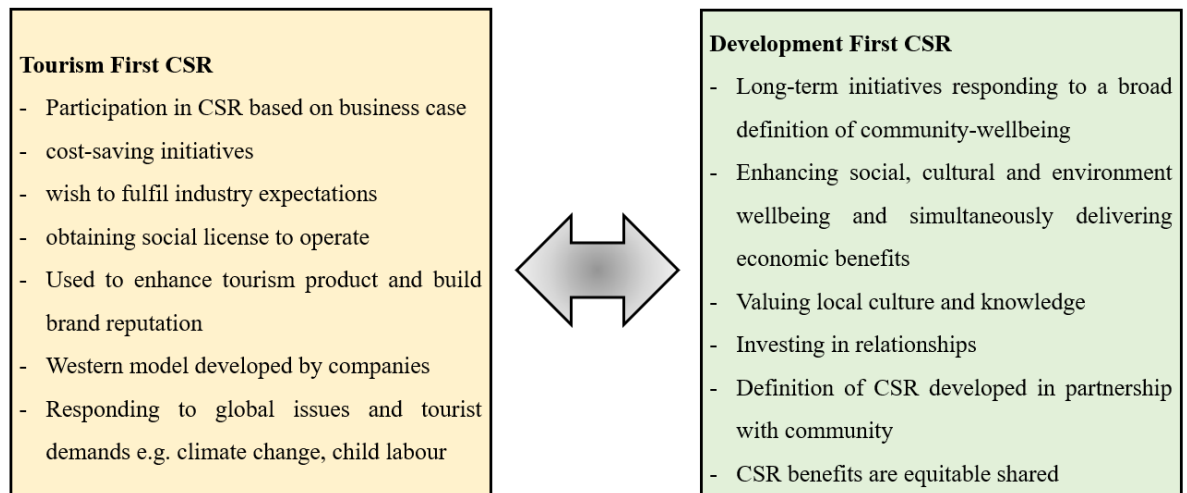
The preceding sections have outlined that CSR practices fail if they are not positioned within the local context. The review of relevant literature has shown that to ensure meaningful and sustainable results of community development initiatives, equitable power relations between the company and the community need to be enhanced and agency within the local population must be encouraged. Both aspects are reflected in the research questions this research report explores. In order to extract meaningful results, the gathered primary data will have to be analysed, interpreted by framing them within an established academic concept.

Within a range of different CSR and sustainability frameworks, Hughes and Scheyvens' (2016) Development First approach, has been identified as the most suitable for this research.

With its holistic focus and an emphasis on the importance of local knowledge, a Development First perspective allows CSR to be framed in alignment with development thinking. It has the ability to highlight key factors in an analysis of the development potential of CSR, including how initiatives are identified and developed, the distribution of benefits, the extent to which cultural, social, economic and community well-being are addressed and the capacity for sustainability. (p. 474)

The approach is based on the tourism planning model by Burns (1999, 2004) who advocated positioning sustainable human development at a company's core instead of the neoliberal focus on economic growth as in the predominant 'Tourism First' approach. Hughes (2016) outlines that the issues Burns identified within the Tourism First practice, namely prioritising the businesses interests and taking an approach solely based on a western perspective, can be found in some CSR initiatives as well. Figure 1

compares and contrasts characteristics of a Tourism First CSR approach with a Development First CSR approach:



***Figure 1: Tourism First CSR vs. Development First CSR own illustration based on Hughes and Scheyvens (2016)***

Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) point out that CSR practice can be seen as a spectrum with most companies, as it is the nature of the private sector, gravitating towards the Tourism First end. To allow a more detailed positioning of companies on this spectrum the authors recommend examining closely “who is setting the agenda, who benefits and what are the intended and unintended outcomes for both corporation and community” (p.477). For this purpose, they developed a range of questions grouped into the key areas of Development First CRS listed in Figure 1. These questions help to hone in on different aspects of CSR and help with the assessment of whether Development First or Tourism First is present. The questions include key aspects such as who sets the agenda (“Who defines local development needs to be addressed by CSR?”), who benefits most (“Who benefits and how are benefits shared/distributed?”), and who takes the lead on Monitoring and Evaluation (“Who is responsible for (a) determining positive indicators of change, and (b) conducting monitoring and evaluation?”) (Hughes and Scheyvens, 2016, p. 477). They questions will guide the reflection on how and to what extent the company’s initiatives are contributing to the holistic and sustainable development of the local community.

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter has shown that the expectations of the private sector in the development space have changed, and its involvement in development assistance has been increasingly encouraged. The SDGs are just the latest manifestation of the notion that the support of the private sector is imperative to make the world a better place for all people to live in. The commitment of companies to change from the core is crucial rather than just seeing their roles as solely providing financial support. The shift from immanent to intentional development (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) has made this very clear. One result of the shift and of being held more responsible by consumers has been the rise of CSR programmes. Literature shows that no unified position on the definition and interpretation of CSR, nor is it clear what CSR should do in relation to community development. Notwithstanding, many case studies have shown that to make an actual impact companies must move beyond the one-sided debate about consumer or customer welfare, otherwise the discussion will remain truncated, dominated by corporate interests, and incomplete.

It is then necessary to incorporate the local context and changing the community's position from a passive recipient to an active participant in CSR, as argued by Hughes and Scheyvens (2016): "In an environment where terms such as 'shared value', 'win-win outcomes' and 'competitive advantage' are readily associated with community development, it is perhaps time to take a closer look at the processes and outcomes according to a people-centred perspective" (p. 478). For the tourism industry, this means moving beyond a 'Tourism First' approach and positioning a 'Development First' mindset at the core of corporate practices.

The methodologies and methods this research project uses to find out whether the examined hotel develops and executes the community development initiatives within its CSR strategy in a holistic way are described in the next chapter.

### **3 Methodology, Methods and Data Sources**

The last chapter presented the academic underpinning for this research report and reviewed and critically discussed relevant literature on the private sector's involvement in development through CSR initiatives. This chapter will comprehensively explain the methodology and methods chosen to achieve the aim and answer the questions of this study as outlined in the first chapter.

Underpinning the whole research process from design to execution to interpretation and finally, writing, is the research philosophy. The philosophy makes up the internal logic of the research and links methodology and methods together (O'Leary, 2017; Punch, 2006). Methodology encompasses research theories of how the world can be analysed while methods mean a set of tools and techniques used to interpret the same (Murray & Overton, 2014).

This chapter starts by explaining the philosophy and methodology of the research and then leads into the description of the two methods of data collection and how those techniques were applied. It continues by sharing the ethical considerations which were considered before data collection and the process of data analysis. It ends up reflecting on how the data collection worked out in practice.

#### **3.1 Research Theory: Philosophy and Methodology**

In 'The essential guide to doing your research project' O'Leary (2017) describes how, over time, two streams of research philosophies have developed. On the one hand, there is the philosophy of just one single truth which, advocates believe, can be discovered through scientific methods. This empirical-analytical way of thinking is often referred to as positivism (Murray & Overton, 2014). O'Leary (2017) describes how, in recent decades, more and more researchers have criticised the inflexibility and black-and-white worldview of positivism. As a result, a new philosophy developed which accepted "chaos, complexity, the unknown, incompleteness, diversity, plurality, fragmentation and multiple realities" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 7). This philosophy, which acknowledges that every individual has their own truth, is often called post-positivism or relativism. Advocates argue that the world is socially constructed, thus, far too complex to be generalised (Saunders et al., 2009). Instead, they thrive for an in-depth

understanding of situations which does not allow for the quantification of the findings but makes them highly context-specific (Altinay & Praskevas, 2008; Saunders et al., 2009).

This research intends to generate understanding about the CCD projects by a resort in the Maldives and to what extent the community is an active partner in these. This aim requires an approach that allows for a deeper understanding of participants' views and experiences. Therefore, the research follows a relativist philosophy concerned with the collection of qualitative data in order “to produce theory rather than test it” (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014, p.59). Furthermore, by talking to people who have been involved in such projects the research takes on a historic-hermeneutic viewpoint which believes that facts do not exist in a vacuum but are always connected to experiences (Murray & Overton, 2014). Hence, the researcher reflects on and interprets processes and patterns in a particular context with no aspiration to making general predictions.

The methods which have been found appropriate to the relativist research philosophy and the qualitative research methodology will be explained in more detail below.

### **3.2 Method of Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection in this study is semi-structured interviews with people who have had experiences connected to the resort's CSR initiatives. To be well prepared for the interviews and to already have a certain basis of knowledge about the community development approach and initiatives as well as the Maldives' socio-economic conditions, the interviews were supplemented by a preliminary analysis of grey literature, websites, and online documents.

#### **3.2.1 Document and Grey Literature Analysis**

As stated earlier, initial data about the resort's CSR strategy and projects were collected through an analysis of grey literature, websites, and online documents. Grey literature “refers to both published and unpublished materials that do not have an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), including conference papers, unpublished research theses, newspaper articles and

pamphlets/brochures” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 98). For background information about the resort, the group’s websites and reports (soneva.com, sonevachangemakers.com, sonevafoundation.org) were used. Fortunately, the resort offers detailed information on their CSR strategy, within the Maldives and globally. A yearly total impact assessment is published on the website. The same applies to detailed information about every project the resort realises itself or supports financially. Furthermore, the Global Compact has an extensive online archive of all its members’ status updates, and Soneva Fushi is part of that (www.unglobalcompact.org). To gain knowledge about the socio-economic context of the Maldives an analysis of reports and website from the National Bureau of Statistics (statisticsmaldives.gov.mv) and the World Bank website (data.worldbank.org) was conducted.

O’Leary (2017) emphasises that when using such information, it is very important to be cautious about which source to include since the data and information we find on the internet has generally been produced for an alternative purpose, thus, cannot be considered relevant primary data. Nevertheless, the statistical information comes from reliable sources that are not known to have a particular agenda, and the resort CSR information, while likely to be presented in a self-promotional way, gave the researcher useful background information to then be better prepared for the interviews. It also enabled me to compare the findings from both the documents and the interviews, to fill possible gaps or follow up on inconsistencies and discrepancies.

### **3.2.2 Interviews**

While different techniques can be used to obtain qualitative data, such as interviews (unstructured, semi-structured, in-depth), focus groups, participant observation or conversation, and discourse analysis to just name a few (Saunders et al., 2009; Stewart-Withers et al., 2014), this research adopted the method of semi-structured interviews. Murray and Overton (2014) write that “a fine balance between rigidity and flexibility is required in fieldwork” (p. 36) which this technique allows for. The semi-structured approach gives the researcher a structure to follow but still leaves a lot of room for spontaneity. This flexibility not only allows for questions to be asked in the order most suited to each interviewee but also permits the researcher to fully probe and explore



responses and be responsive to new, relevant issues raised by the interviewee (Altinay & Praskevas, 2008; Bryman, 2012; Legard et al., 2003).

The participants were purposefully selected based on being able to provide informative and relevant information due to their involvement with the resort's CSR initiatives. To gain insights not only from the business perspective but also from the receiving community, two resort employees and three members of the receiving communities were interviewed. Gathering data from both sides helped to cross-reference and compare the information. The criteria for participation for community members was to have been involved in one or more such projects in the past and to be confident to share critical opinions. Thus for this small study purposive sampling was seen as an appropriate mechanism, even though this does not result in a sample that is representative of the total population (Saunders et al., 2009). The ethical considerations which arise from this as well as other moral reflections are taken a closer look at in the following section.

### **3.3 Ethics**

Research with humans makes it necessary to consider any possible ethical issues beforehand (O'Leary, 2017). Massey University has a clear process in place and follows a detailed code of ethical conduct. To ensure integrity in all steps of the research process from data collection to analysis and evaluation, every student must first undergo the International Development Studies in-house ethics process before applying for approval under the Massey University Human Ethics Code. This research has gone through both procedures and was ranked low-risk (appendix Ethics Confirmation). However, even in low-risk research several ethical issues had to be considered.

Contact with the resort was established through a former employer of mine. The idea of my research, the aims, and the process was first discussed with the resort group's Sustainability Manager who then connected me to two employees in charge of CSR projects called Community Engagement Managers (CEMs). Due to a lack of personal contacts and the limited possibility to be on-site due to Covid-19, I could not access possible community participants independently. Thus, one of the CEMs, a Maldivian who had done her Master's in Australia, connected me to two local people. However, these two interviewees connected me, independently from the CEM, to two other local

representatives. In the process of identifying suitable participants within the communities, the CEM furthermore acknowledged how important it is to have people who are not afraid to speak their minds to obtain useful results. This CEM seemed to have a good understanding of the critical social science research approach I wanted to adopt, and she understood that I did not want to just be directed to community members who were supporters of the resort. However, being referred to the local community through the resort might affect the interviewees' perception of power dynamics, which in return would influence their openness and honesty in responses (Scheyvens et al., 2014). Therefore, in introducing myself to community participants I took the time to make it clear that the study was not conducted on behalf of the resort but as an independent research project.

This topic does not pose a general risk to participants' physical or psychological health. However, tourism and resort islands are highly political topics in the Maldives (Country Watch Incorporated, 2020; Henderson, 2008; Jamal & Lagiewski, 2006). Critical statements could harm the relationship between the interviewee and the resort – maybe even the community as a whole and the resort. To avoid any damage to the participant's reputation, dignity, or relationships with others, all information enclosed has been stored securely and anonymised. The exact data from the interviews was not passed on to the resort, just the general findings. The findings were also shared with all interested interview participants. I hope that the findings will be helpful and therefore implemented so that the CSR strategy is further improved. Nevertheless, care was taken not to set unrealistic expectations within the community of what the research might achieve for them (Scheyvens et al., 2014).

Last but not least, an important all-pervading factor to consider for researchers is positionality. Every person is influenced by his or her background and experiences and evaluates and interprets situations and information accordingly (O'Leary, 2017). A continuous reflection on possible biases as an educated female from a developed country, and a permanent questioning of the same when analysing and interpreting all data was a constant part of the research. As someone who had previously worked in the tourism sector, it might be assumed that I would automatically empathise with resort employees. However, my decision to travel across the world to undertake a Master's degree which critically examines development processes, and my choice of topic

(particularly, seeking community perspectives), indicate that I was trying to move beyond an industry-centric viewpoint.

### **3.4 Data Collection in Practice**

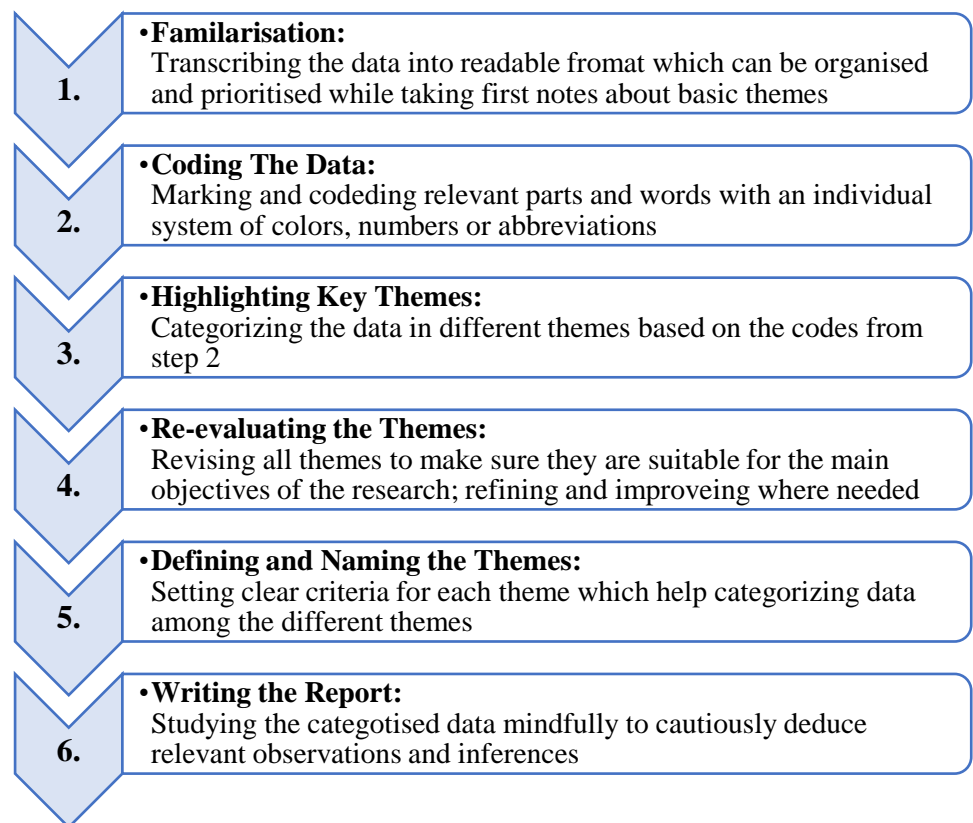
Due to the ongoing pandemic, like many other research projects, my fieldwork had to be organised differently than originally planned. Instead of research on-site in the Maldives for several weeks, the data had to be collected from afar making use of online communication technology. While the grey literature and document analysis would have been the same under different circumstances, the selection of candidates and conduct of interviews needed adaption to the circumstances.

As mentioned, the data collection process for the interviews had to be adapted due to the travel limitations the Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted on the world. Fortunately, new internet-based communication technologies are enabling researchers to collect qualitative data from other regions of the world without having to travel (McLennan & Prinsen, 2014). Each of the interviews was conducted individually via a video call and while this was the best possible way to collect data about the Maldives while being based in Germany, it is important to acknowledge that internet-based methods have some downsides. McLennan and Prinsen (2014) point out that “internet-based communications still feel less natural to many people” and “the loss of visual cues and body language can make it very difficult ... to build rapport” (p. 98). In order to counteract some of these side effects as best as possible, each participant was free to choose the system through which the call was conducted. This ensured that the participants knew how to execute a video call and felt comfortable with the technological requirements.

Originally four interviews were planned with an even amount of resort and community representatives. While the first two interviews, both with resort employees, went smoothly in terms of preceding communication and actual conduct, the second two with community representatives were more challenging. Long waiting times between the email communication and not showing up at the agreed time made clear to me how little influence the researcher has on the participants from such a distance, and how difficult it is to build a relationship with participants without face-to-face contact. In the meantime, it became clear that a third local person would be beneficial to represent

more parts of the Maldivian society. Since one participant chose not to communicate further after a non-appearance for the interview, further participants had to be found at short notice. Luckily, eventually a second and third community representative was found who both shared new insights from different parts of the society. Overall, the period of active data collection ended up stretching into four weeks instead of just one, as I had initially planned.

After these obstacles were overcome, the collected data had to be processed and analysed to draw out key themes. As qualitative data is not numeric it cannot be quantified nor statistically summarised but needs to be approached differently. To address this issue a range of qualitative data analysis approaches have been developed by social studies scholars (O'Leary, 2017). I used thematic analysis which is a common way to process data from interviews, survey questionnaires, focus groups or other types of non-numeric data (Smith, 2020). Figure 2 illustrates the six steps forming the thematic analysis:



*Figure 2: Six steps of thematic analysis for qualitative data based on Smith (2020)*

The steps help researchers to “preserve richness, yet crystallize meaning” (p. 345) while keeping the focus and not getting lost in the vast amount of gathered data (O'Leary,

2017). The findings from this process will be elucidated in Chapter 5 after the overview of the Maldivian context in Chapter 4.

### 3.5 Summary

The above has shown that a well-conceptualised research project requires rigorous planning. In the case of this research topic, the background work has indicated that a relativistic methodology with a qualitative research approach is the right choice to achieve meaningful findings. The chapter outlined how both grey literature analysis and semi-structured interviews with purposely selected participants were chosen as methods. Semi-structured interviews were ideal to collect the necessary information while leaving enough room for the individual stories of the participants. The chapter then moved on to explain the ethical considerations which I reflected on and discussed with my supervisor. When researching with humans it is essential to think through what effect the project can have on the participants and their environment. While this research does not pose an immediate threat to the participants' physical or psychological health there could still be repercussions so this needed consideration.

As section 3.4 outlined, I had to learn that even rigorous planning around data collection does not always work out in practice the way one imagined in theory. The delay due to interviews not taking place and the difficult search for alternative community representatives were a challenge for me. Nevertheless, this is also part of the experience that has made me grow as a researcher. The process has provided me with valuable lessons about how to conduct research despite a big geographical distance and helped improve my intercultural communication skills.

Finally, the chapter talked about the thematic analysis which helped me to organise and extract key schemes from my data while keeping the focus and not getting lost in the vast amount of information. To be able to put the findings into perspective the next chapter will first provide background knowledge about the Maldives and the case study resort.

## 4 Soneva Fushi and the Maldivian Context

Just over 40 years ago, the Maldives was considered one of the 20 poorest countries in the world (Mohamed, 2019). Today, it is a middle-income country and was ranked 95th in the Human Development Index last year (UNDP, 2020a). This chapter will give an overview of how this change took place and how much a single industry, tourism, had to do with it. It starts with a broad overview of the general geographical and socio-economic situation and then goes into more detail about the role of the travel industry. Afterwards, the resort Soneva Fushi is introduced, and its sustainability strategy and CSR programme are described.

### 4.1 Socio-Economic Context of the Maldives

The Maldives archipelago is located about 600 km southwest of the southern tip of India in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. It contains some of the largest coral reef areas on earth, consisting of approximately 1,200 islands with a total area of 298 km<sup>2</sup> organised in 26 atolls (Ministry of Tourism, 2021). The population of 450,000 people is dispersed across 185 ‘inhabited’ islands (Kothari & Arnall, 2020) with 30% living in the capital city, Malé (World Bank, 2020b). The immense biodiversity of flora and fauna that develops in and around the reefs represents an exceptional marine biotope (Arndt, 2006). In contrast, the above-water flora of the Maldives is not very distinctive due to the lack of rich soil (Lyon, 2003). The island state is characterised by a year-round tropical climate, a lack of a rainy season, and perennial temperatures around 30° C (Ministry of Tourism, 2021).

Politically, the climate in the island state is not as steady as the year-round meteorological temperature. The country became an autonomous republic in 1978 after a long series of different colonial rulers. Maoon Abdul Gayoom came into power as the first president and held the position as authoritarian ruler for thirty years (Kothari, 2014). While some “saw him as the architect of one of the most prosperous countries in South Asia” (Scheyvens, 2011a, p. 158), critics point to the human rights violations and systematic repression of the political opposition that took place while he was in power (Henderson, 2008; Hirsch, 2015; Masters, 2006). As political pressure rose, in 2005 Gayoom eventually allowed political parties to form and in 2008 the country’s

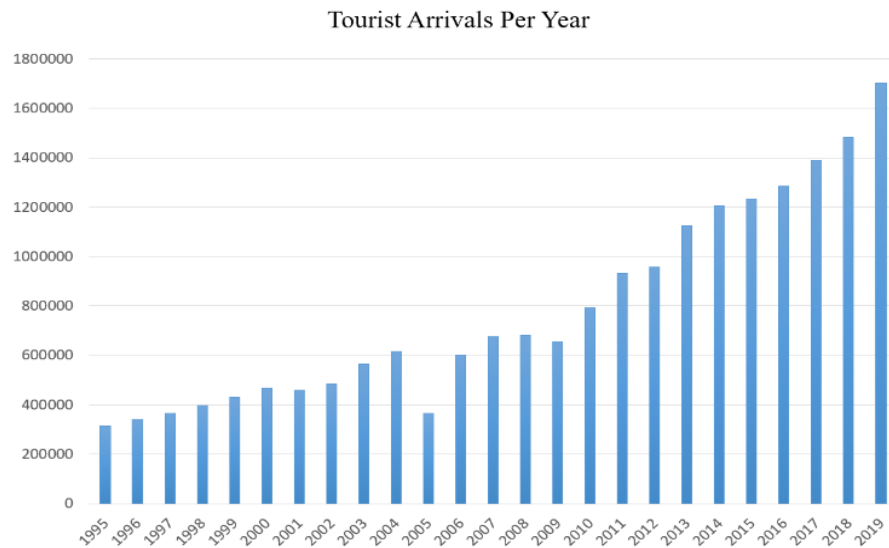
first democratic election took place. In the course of this election, Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldivian Democratic Party became the new head of government (Hirsch, 2015). He received a lot of international media attention after holding an underwater cabinet meeting signing a declaration concerning climate change. However, while this PR stunt and his strong political focus on climate issues received much international acclaim, he was strongly criticised for it in his own country. Nasheed “resigned in the wake of mass protest and mounting political violence ... though the specific circumstances of his departure remain unclear” (Hirsch, 2015, p. 193). Despite other democratic elections since then peace and stability have not returned to Maldivian politics, but rather old autocratic behavioural patterns emerged again. The latest election in 2018 was again accompanied by “criticism over media restrictions and questions were raised over whether the election could be held in a free and fair manner” (Country Watch Incorporated, 2020, p.44). However, the outcome, naming Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a member of the Democratic Party, as the new president made clear that the Maldivian population were wishing for a return to a democratic government.

The unique geographical conditions of the country also bring some difficulties with them. Firstly, as former President Nasheed made internationally known, the state is particularly threatened by climate change owing to the majority of the land area rising less than one metre above sea level (Hirsch, 2015). Secondly, the country’s geographical dispersal and small, scattered population pose many infrastructure challenges (Kothari, 2014). The concentration of basic services, employment opportunities, education, and health care facilities on the main island led to a high density of residents in Malé (Mohamed, 2019), at the same time increasing the income disparities between the capital island and the outer atolls (Scheyvens, 2011a). Thirdly, a small landmass and little resources led to a limited selection of possible income opportunities paired with a high dependency on imported goods (Shakeela et al., 2011).

Since the introduction of tourism in the 1970s, it has become the main element of the Maldivian economy. The next paragraph goes into detail about that development and the significance of the travel industry today.

## 4.2 Tourism in the Maldives

Tourism in the Maldives has been an economic success story. Since the construction of the first two resorts in 1972, the idea of endless white beaches and a clear blue sea has attracted a continuous stream of tourists leading to a record number of 1.7 million tourist arrivals in 2019. Figure 3 illustrates the growth in arrival numbers per year since 1995:



**Figure 3: Growth in tourist arrivals in the Maldives 1996-2019**  
(World Bank, 2020a)

However, the vulnerability of the tourism industry to external shocks is reflected in the drop in arrivals in 2005 after the Asian Tsunami and in 2009 due to the global financial crisis. Also since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the 154 resorts, 13 hotels, 158 cruise ships, and 614 guesthouses have recorded many shortfalls (Ministry of Tourism, 2021) and the country's GDP is expected to decline as much as -26.4% in the worst-case scenario (National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Tourism, 2020).

The description of the relationship between the Maldives and tourism as a “hyper-dependency” (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018, p. 15) becomes even more understandable when looking at the state's economic figures. In 2015 international tourism accounted for 32% of direct employment or, to give an absolute number, a total of 44,954 jobs (10 percent of the population) are provided just by the resorts (National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Tourism, 2020). In addition, there are many jobs in associated sectors such as construction or transportation. Over 90% of government tax revenues are gained



through tourism-related taxes and the connected import duties (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2011; Scheyvens, 2011a). Tourism revenues totalled US\$3.2 billion in 2019, and the industry contributed 21% of the country's GDP<sup>1</sup> (National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Tourism, 2020).

From the beginning, tourism has been closely observed and controlled by the Maldivian Government. Scheyvens (2011a) describes the development of the industry as “neither random nor automatic” instead “it was carefully planned ... by a government that saw the economic benefits that tourism could bring but, cautious of its potential negative impacts, planned for it to evolve carefully” (p. 150). Even after an investor has won in the complicated bidding process to establish a resort on an ‘uninhabited’ island, they need to follow strict rules. The environmental policies, for example, include:

- limited allowance to cut the island vegetation and no buildings higher than the treetops
  - only 20% of the island's landmass can be utilised for buildings; if the resort builds overwater villas in the lagoon the equal space needs to be left free on the island
  - all guest rooms should face the beach with an open area of at least 5 meters of beach available for each room
- (Dowling & Wood, 2017)

For a long time, the destination was well-known for its one-island-one resort policy, which was modified by the first democratically elected government in 2008. This segregation was motivated by the “ongoing concern over the implications of exposing the ‘100%’ Sunni Muslim population to proximate hedonistic leisure tourism” (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018, p. 15) creating an enclaved type of tourism. Before 2008, the inhabited islands (where the Maldivian people lived) could only be visited by tourists during daylight under strict regulations (Scheyvens, 2011a). For instance, tourists were briefed beforehand on how to dress and behave appropriately (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018). As a result of increasing political unrest about the big income disparities within the population, President Nasheed's cabinet softened the one-island-one-resort rule allowing the establishment of guesthouses on inhabited islands as well

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<sup>1</sup> Other papers have cited higher percentages between 25-30% (Cowburn et al., 2018; de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2014; Shakeela et al., 2011; Shareef et al., 2014). However, this is the latest number released in official statistics by the Maldivian Government.

(Kothari & Arnall, 2020; Shakeela et al., 2011). The allowance of guest houses gave the population new opportunities to participate in the tourism success of their country but many policies are still to the benefit of international investors and a small elite instead of the whole population (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018). The high taxes and the competitive bidding processes create a very high investment entry barrier (Scheyvens, 2011a) making it nearly impossible for new, smaller investors to compete.

These strict policies have led to the Maldives' tourism industry often being advertised as not just an economic but also a sustainable success story. However, as Hall and Brown (2008) caution, often in the tourism sector we find that "rarely have notions of 'sustainability' been interpreted or employed in holistic terms. Rather, sustaining the tourism industry and the resources upon which it depends has appeared all too often to be the major priority" (p. 1024). This seems to be true in the Maldives as well, where historically resorts have been focusing on ecological problems, and now both environmental and socio-economic challenges that the local population face have been coming increasingly to the surface (Brown et al., 1997; Scheyvens, 2011a). Due to the high visitor numbers, the production of waste and usage of water has significantly increased (Cowburn et al., 2018; Dowling & Wood, 2017; Kothari & Arnall, 2017). Landscapes have been changed to be more appealing to tourists and water villas are built directly on coral reefs (Kothari & Arnall, 2020; Scheyvens, 2011a). All of these actions have devastating effects on the reefs and marine wildlife, and they also redirect currents which in turn washes away sands sometimes shrinking islands (Ghina, 2003).

As for the socio-economic aspects, Shakeela et al. (2011) note that "while the government and industry in the Maldives consider tourism to be a success, there are considerable disparities in income and access to social services, infrastructure, and other opportunities" (p. 255). It has been criticised that all land is owned by the government and only a small group of local elites profit from the bidding process investors must go through to obtain the leasing right for an uninhabited resort island (Scheyvens, 2011a; Shakeela & Weaver, 2018). While these elites, often connected to the ruling government, are getting richer, according to the Asian Development Bank (2020) in 2016 8.2% of the population were living below the poverty line. This occurs especially in the outer atolls where there are fewer resorts, and many people struggle due to poverty and little access to infrastructure (Midha, 2008; Scheyvens, 2011a).

Another issue amplified by the strict separation of resort islands and local communities has been the employment situation. Despite claims of the job opportunities which tourism brings, in 2019 less than 50% of employees in Maldivian resorts were of Maldivian nationality (National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Tourism, 2020). Shakeela et al. (2011) identify on the one hand the social isolation while working on the separated resort islands is a reason but on the other hand, jobs are often deliberately given to expatriates instead of local people. They further outline that expatriates receive a significantly higher wage than Maldivians in the same positions. Moreover, many Maldivians prefer to stay on their home island and generate a low income from fishing rather than facing the long months they would have to spend at a resort far away from their families, and the basic living conditions (Scheyvens, 2011a; Shakeela et al., 2011). While the literacy rate is steadily approaching 100% (World Bank, 2020b), higher education facilities are limited (Shareef et al., 2014). Shakeela et al. (2011) reason that this results in a lack of business skills as well as missing know-how of the local population. This creates new problems like a significant rate of youth unemployment and an increasing drug problem among the same (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Shareef and Sodique (2013) put it in a nutshell: “Human resources development has not kept pace with economic development” (p. 4).

All the above leaves open the questions: What are the tourism businesses doing about this? Are they helping to counteract the environmental and social issues they have helped create? The next chapter will try to find some answers.

### **4.3 CSR in the Maldives**

The previous section has shown how important tourism is for the Maldives as an island state. However, it also revealed that the industry brings many injustices with it and is not as sustainable as sometimes portrayed. This raises the question of what the industry participants are doing about it.

One main source was available to overview CSR in the Maldives, namely Shareef and Sodique (2013). These authors conducted a baseline study about CSR in the Maldives in cooperation with the UNDP to examine to what extent businesses (in general, not solely tourism) and their stakeholders understood and implemented in terms of CSR practices. The following findings from the study have relevance for this research:

- despite being the main promoters of CSR, businesses in the Maldives lack a wider understanding of CSR. Instead, they mainly reduce it to philanthropy and charity. Most companies were not aware of the UN's Global Compact.
- The intensity and direction of CSR strategies are often directly dependent on the vision and convictions of the owner.
- Only 68% of companies have a formal CSR strategy. Consultation with stakeholders had been done by 23% and a performance assessment by 9%.
- In the tourism sector, CSR involvement is higher than in other sectors. The main focus lies on environmental protection and employee welfare.

The reasons identified by Shareef and Sodique (2013) for higher involvement in CSR of tourism businesses align with the motivations outlined in Chapter 2, for example, customer demands, international competition, and strict policies. The authors also emphasise that the level of CSR differs widely along with the range of players. Whereas resorts under international management tend to focus on environmental aspects, “community projects are managed/handled by local owners of the resorts rather than the international management firms” (p. 24). Since companies rarely act in a completely altruistic manner when implementing CSR strategies, this is not surprising. The Maldivian tourism product is largely designed around the geographical aspects of its islands, like the azure waters, white sand beaches and steady tropical year-round climate, rather than a cultural experience (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2011; Ministry of Tourism, 2021). Local resort owners or owners of guesthouses on inhabited islands, on the other hand, have a higher motivation to include social initiatives in their CSR strategy because of their location nearby to a community or because “local owners tend to be prominent individuals who also have political involvement and thus have an active interest to be involved with the local community” (Shareef & Sodique, 2013, p. 24).

As a result, CCD still makes up only a small part of CSR activities. In the baseline study, only 43% of all questioned businesses chose Community Development when asked about areas of contribution to social activities (Shareef & Sodique, 2013). “Though not common, some resorts have established partnerships with island communities and community-based NGOs. Where the results of partnerships with island communities are successful resorts happened to sustain the partnerships” explain Shareef and Sodique (2013, p. 25). When striving for community development the resorts support the following types of activities: infrastructure development, providing

assistance to local schools and health institutions, encouraging employees to volunteer on special island holidays (e.g. cleaning beaches, planting trees, holding workshops, organising sports activities), or arranging tours for the resort guests to local islands to increase the local people's income through sales of handicrafts or food to tourists (Shareef & Sodique, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

It has been outlined earlier (Section 2.3) how important the incorporation of local context and voices is for a successful and holistic CSR approach. Shareef and Sodique (2013) agree and suggest, among other things, that businesses in the Maldives should work more closely with the various stakeholders to improve their CSR strategies. They write that “most companies do not appreciate that there is a need for stakeholder engagement because they do not fully comprehend the complexity of CSR” (p. 52).

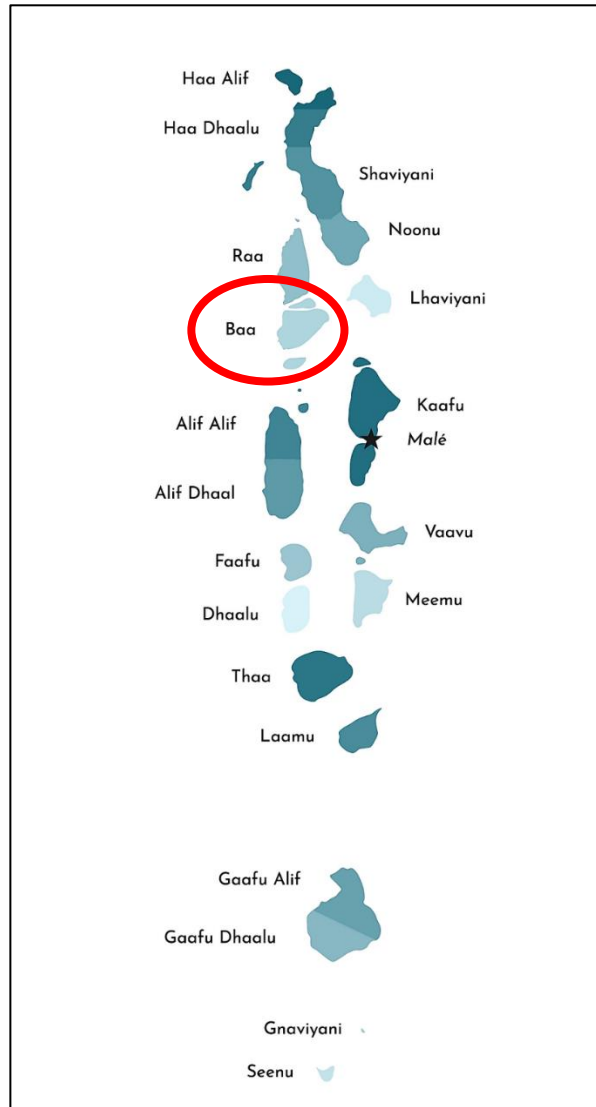
To put it in a nutshell, while the tourism industry especially is already taking steps in the right direction there is still much room for improvement on CSR practices in the Maldives. The focus of the tourism industry is primarily on environmental factors instead of striving for a holistic approach including social and economic sustainability aspects. The next section will look at how such an orientation applies to the resort investigated in this study.

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<sup>2</sup> More recent online research and academic papers indicate a growing commitment to community development (Abdulla, 2020; Manik, 2018; Ramkissoon, 2020), however, no comprehensive current study exists about the actual extent of community development in Maldivian resorts' CSR programmes.

#### 4.4 Soneva Fushi – The Resort and its CSR initiatives

Soneva Fushi is situated on Kunfunadhoo Island in the Baa Atoll which is located in the north-west of Malé (Figure 4).



***Figure 4: Map of Atolls of Maldives (World Atlas, 2020)  
with own highlighting of Baa Atoll***

It is part of the Soneva Group encompassing a second resort in the Maldives and one in Thailand. While Soneva Fushi is indisputably a high-end luxury resort the owners sell their very own version of luxury which revolves around the SLOW LIFE philosophy (Sustainable-Local-Organic-Wellness-Learning-Inspiring-Fun-Experiences) (Soneva Changemakers, 2021). A stay is marketed as “an awareness-building experience” through which “people ... recognise the necessity of repairing the damage that we, the rich, have caused” (Tang, n.d., para. 5). This indicates that the resort is not only taking

sustainability very seriously but based its whole brand on it. The detailed information available online about its CSR strategies and initiatives enhances this impression. The resort is an active member of the UN Global Compact and issues frequent progress reports (UN Global Compact, 2021). Since 2014, they publish a yearly total impact assessment report to audit the overall social and environmental impacts of the resort's direct and indirect operations (Soneva Changemakers, 2021). Additionally, a range of other surveys and statements, such as a brochure on their commitment to the SDGs, a Supplier Code and Human Rights statement, can be found on the company's website (Soneva, 2021c).

### **CO2 mitigation and offsetting**

While reading the reports and looking at the websites one quickly realises that the resort has a strong focus on environmental aspects of sustainability. Above all, Soneva tries to make its own operations as environmentally friendly as possible e.g. by producing its electricity through a solar plant and a complex recycling system (Oines, 2017). However, they recognise that the most significant impact is the air travel guests must do to arrive at the remote location. Through their own non-profit foundation, they fund environmental projects in different parts of the world to offset the carbon emission from the resort activities and the guests' flights (Oines, 2017). By its own account, Soneva managed to mitigate its complete emissions for the first time in 2012 and has since then been carbon neutral (UN Global Compact, 2021).

Such mitigation practices have, as mentioned before, been criticised for offsetting problems the company created itself. In the case of luxury resorts, critiques about their environmental impacts are aggravated due to their higher level of water and energy consumption than other lower end accommodations, as well as higher rates of waste production (Hadjikakou et al., 2015; Robbins & Gaczorek, 2015). Robbins and Gaczorek (2015) have confirmed this for the specific case of Soneva Fushi as well. They noted that while Soneva is performing better than other luxury resorts their waste production and resource usage is still much higher than that of the local population. Furthermore, it has been shown that tourists "accept sustainability initiatives as long as these initiatives do not detract from their comfort, alter their activities or access or limit their actual consumption" (Moscardo, 2017, p.184). This can lead to resorts that

promise both luxury and sustainability appearing hypocritical on closer inspection. The refrigerated rooms for wine and cold cuts, as well as chocolate and ice cream, are a good example that Soneva follows the luxury wishes of their guests, even if this does not promote sustainable practices. On the same note, Moscardo (2017) has criticised that while guest air travel contributes a significant share to the resort's carbon emissions, they do not seem to target other markets from which guests would have to travel shorter distances.

### **Employment**

Notwithstanding the bigger focus on environmental sustainability, in recent years the resort is actively expanding the social part of its CSR strategy. For one they try to actively counteract many of the earlier outlined challenges of the Maldivian employment market. Soneva gives preference to hiring local people and has a special focus on female Maldivians. Currently, 6% of all employees at the resort are female Maldivians (*Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*). This might seem low for Western standards, but not compared to the employment estimates captured in the 2019 Resort Employee Survey by the National Bureau of Statistics and Ministry of Tourism (2020), which lists only 10% of the resorts' workforce as female. Furthermore, Soneva has the unique position of a Maldivian resort island being located so close to inhabited islands that some of their employees can commute daily<sup>3</sup>. For those having to live on the resort island for a long amount of time, the company purportedly invests in nice facilities and good food (UN Global Compact, 2021). Additionally, the resort organises training for their employees to enhance qualifications and know-how but also for personal development (Soneva Changemakers, 2021).

However, Soneva is not free from the fact that luxury resorts in developing countries rely on the employment of highly skilled foreign workers (Hemmati und Koehler 2000). While about 50% of the resort employees are Maldivians still two-thirds of managerial positions are held by expatriates (*Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*).

The active involvement of employees in shaping the resort's CCD programmes is desired and supported by established processes. For example, employees have the

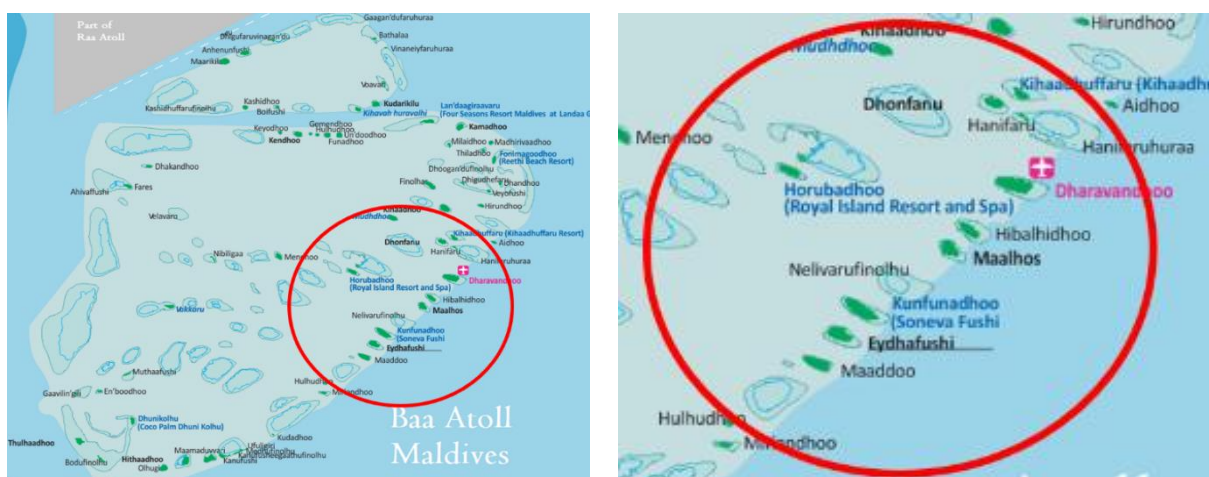
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<sup>3</sup> For the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, this was not possible due to travel restrictions between the different islands.



possibility to submit suggestions for development projects to their head of department as a so-called “NIBIs” (New Idea Better Idea). NIBIs can be both suggestions regarding employment and living on the island as well as ideas for the home communities of the employees (*Resort Representative 2, Interview, April 2021*).

Aside from the resort's own employees, the residents of the nearby islands are also moving into the focus of the resort's CSR activities. While many other resort islands are rather isolated from islands inhabited by Maldivian people, the island of Kunfunadhoo is situated close to Eydafushi and several other inhabited islands like Maalhos or Dharavandhoo (see Figure 5):



**Figure 5: Map of Baa Atoll (Sea Seek, 2021) with own modifications**

The CCD projects are under the supervision of the resort's CEMs who are subordinate to the group's sustainability manager who is positioned in Thailand.

### **Swimming and Surfing Lessons**

The SOS – Soneva Ocean Stewards project was the first to be launched by the resort for the neighbouring islands. Despite growing up on islands surrounded by water many Maldivians children do not learn to swim while they are young. The resort, which assumes that swimming also helps to create environmental awareness for the ocean, has moved from training the children and adults directly to coaching local inhabitants to become swimming instructors themselves. The project has been extended in 2018 to include surfing lessons, particularly for girls and women, who it is hoped will learn to

love surfing and the water and thus will “become passionate advocates of the ocean” (Soneva Changemakers, 2021, Soneva Surf section, para. 2).

### **Namoona Baa**

Namoona started as a pilot project with the neighbouring island of Maalhos where clean drinking water packed in single-use plastic bottles had to be delivered from Malé due to dry wells (Soneva Foundation, 2021). The Soneva Foundation (2021) funded a solar-powered desalination plant and donated glass bottles to eliminate all use of imported plastic bottles. The initiative was completed through sustainability workshops where Maalhos’ inhabitants learn about ocean pollution and waste separation in everyday life. An additional goal was to eliminate the practice of open burning of plastic waste on bonfires which is a common way of waste disposal in the Maldives (Soneva, 2021b). In support of this Soneva built a centre, similar to the ‘Eco-Centro’ they have on the resort island:

The eco-centro model was pioneered at Soneva Fushi, which is located close to Maalhos. .... food and organic waste, metals, and bottles are chipped, ground down or composted, and turned into things of economic value, such as concrete building blocks and fertilizer. Plastic waste is either recycled or used to create useful new objects. (News Voir, 2020)

The project was met with so much positive response by the local population and its island council that other islands and the national government became aware of it. Due to this support Namoon Baa is now on the verge to become a registered NGO that which will launch and support the same initiatives throughout the whole Baa Atoll.

### **Youth Development**

On top of these independent, all-year-round programmes, Soneva has been partnering with the Baa Atoll Education Centre on Eydhafushi. Equally, a strong focus lies on sustainability and environmental awareness but furthermore, there is a focus on increasing job opportunities for the local youth. Every year they offer several local teenagers who finished school a six-month training programme on the island where the participants get to know a range of different departments and positions (Soneva Changemakers, 2021). Additionally, the local chef on Soneva Fushi organises a cooking competition leading up to which the children get inside a professional resort

kitchen and restaurant. Then there exists the Soneva Eco Camp, which teaches pupils the waste-to-wealth concept over five days: “UNDP specialists provide the children with theory at the camp while Soneva’s in-house experts provide tangible examples of how to apply sustainability best practice” (Soneva Changemakers, 2021, Eco Camp section, para. 2).

The company conducts annual surveys among their employees but no information could be found on surveys among the local islands’ populations. While a survey of inhabitants of the nearby islands is beyond the scope of this report the interviews with local Maldivians will try to shine some light on their perception of the above community development initiatives by resorts.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The last four sections provided the reader with the necessary background knowledge relevant to the case study of this research report. This included geographical, political and socio-economic data about the island state of the Maldives and moved on to the importance of the tourism industry before ending with specifics about the resort under examination. The focus was to illustrate the powerful position of the tourism industry which is accompanied by a “hyper-dependency” (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018, p. 15). While the introduction of the travel industry has helped the country to achieve an impressive economic upswing, it has also brought some social problems with it.

The unique, dispersed geography of the island state has influenced the one-island-one-resort policy on the one hand, and on the other hand, often makes resorts a more obvious development partner than the seemingly distant government.

The last section of this chapter moved on to the case study resort Soneva Fushi. It was found that the resort has an extensive CSR agenda and a wide range of CCD projects. The comprehensive reports published on their websites as well as the Global Compact page suggest that the hotel is a sustainable success story. Nevertheless, the sustainability of Soneva Fushi has its limits and many initiatives are merely offsetting their own impacts like the CO2 mitigation programmes. Furthermore, the resort’s strong focus on sustainability in the ecological sense is particularly striking. This could be attributed to the presence of climate change in the region but also to the appeal of this issue to guests, as it corresponds with their understanding of sustainability. Even the

many social initiatives that the resort undertakes, among others for its employees but also the rest of the local population, are often environmentally related.

In order to better understand these and other insights, the interviews were conducted with the CEMs but also with some community members. The findings that emerged and the extent to which Soneva can be placed on the spectrum of a Development First or Tourism First approach will be examined in more detail in the upcoming chapter.

## 5 Research Findings

To briefly review, this research seeks to answer the question of which actions towards community development the resort under review takes and how these are perceived from the community's perspective. Chapter 5 aims to answer research question 1: To what extent is the targeted community an active partner in the decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation process of community development? Through interviews, local voices were sought out to answer this question from a community perspective rather than a corporate viewpoint as has been the predominant case in academic literature. Each section examines a step in the process of a community development project from the idea generation to implementation to finally monitoring and evaluation. The chapter ends with a summary.

### 5.1 Community Involvement in Decision Making

There was a great deal of agreement among all interview participants that suggestions and ideas for Soneva to invest in community development can be put forward by both parties. While the first contact seems to have been established by the resort, the community members meanwhile feel comfortable to actively put forward their development needs.

The Soneva people approached me in the beginning, but I am a person who grabs opportunities so now I do approach them ... We approach them and they approach us when we have something to discuss.

*(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

Since we have started partnering with Soneva it has been a two-way street. We can contact them whenever we have a suggestion for projects, and they can contact us. The connection is mutual.

*(Community Representative 3, Interview, April 2021)*

Often ideas also emerge among the employees and are handed in as NIBIs.

For smaller projects, the decision-making process is short and often only requires a call from the community to one of the CEMs. On other occasions, the CEM travels to the local islands "to talk to the island council and to the community and to check on what's going on over there and what we can help them with further" (*Resort Representative 2, Interview, April 2021*).

In this context, it is worth describing the good relationship between Soneva and the local people on neighbouring islands. The importance of a good relationship with the communities for the resort is very much reflected in the fact that a position exists whose main task is to maintain that relationship. The CEMs spend a lot of time on the local islands meeting up with different representatives and parts of society like the island council but also teachers, parents, and the youth. On top of this also the highest management level of the resort becomes involved in community development activities and interacts with the local people without any presumptuousness:

We feel that from the owner to the resort staff they have this going forward approach and we can talk to them at eye level. All levels are committed and involved in the projects and workshops. How Sonu has been involved and available in the discussions has been very valuable to us. When there is a request, we can request directly to the owner.

*(Community Representative 3, Interview, April 2021)*

It can be assumed that the personal contact with the CEMs and the strong commitment of the managerial positions up to the CEO help build a unique partnership between the resort and the local population. Thanks to this connection, community members can put less effort into contacting the resort than if the power imbalance was more prominent.

Furthermore, the research showed that the resort tries to align its development goals with the priorities of other stakeholders. This encompasses NGOs and international institutions but especially the island council and the Maldivian national government. Being democratically elected the latter two represent the local population and can voice the community's development needs towards the resort.

We got together all the stakeholders including the island councils, the council presidents, the Ministry of Environment, many other ministries and lots of NGOs. We brought everybody together for a workshop activity across a week to talk about waste and marine pollution.

*(Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

Nevertheless, there are limits to the decision-making power of community members, as in the final instance the resort decides to support a project or not, as illustrated by the comment of a resort representative:

For the community initiatives that are just ad hoc requests that come in...we assess if Soneva can help. If we have budget for that kind of specific project and see if we can support it.

*(Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

Besides the budgeting, the research revealed a major constraint that prevents the development priorities of the community from being heard holistically: the strong focus on sustainability in the ecological sense.

I think like all of our neighbouring communities know what sort of projects we would support...because we are very focused on sustainability and environmental conservation and those sorts of areas. So those are the projects that we are approached about.

*(Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

This comment makes one wonder whether the community would also contact Soneva if they wanted to tackle a development issue that was important to them which had no connection to environmental issues or conservation. Comments from community participants suggest that this would not be the case: “I think the community knows them for the kind of green projects that they do. They know what they can approach them about and to what they would say no” (*Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*). When asked directly if they would wish for less focus on sustainability the opinions between the community members differ:

I think they should keep focusing on the environment [rather] than these social issues. Because then it would become more political... People do not expect them to be involved in these things. ...When you are involved in other community issues like drug use and these things it is a high political level. It would not be good for them and their reputation.

*(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

Our Island does not have that much problem with these drugs and other issues. But if someone can do some information about the abuse of drugs that would be fine. And then migration is a big problem. So, they can just use some lessons on that... [Also a] workshop so that the people on this island will remain on this island and do something good for this island.

*(Community Representative 2, Interview, April 2021)*

Soneva could do more social projects with us. For example, I would like to have a training facility for young people to go to after they finish school. But it should not just be about hospitality but also other sectors. Other sectors like the IT sector would be interesting for the youngsters I think to have alternatives to going to work in a resort.

*(Community Representative 3, Interview, April 2021)*

This limited focus on one aspect of sustainability aspect is also reflected in the communication of CSR projects on the resort’s websites and reports (Soneva, 2019b, 2021; Soneva Changemakers, 2021; Soneva Foundation, 2021). Social and economic projects like supporting women in the workforce, offering internships for young

Maldivians, and generally creating employment opportunities do all exist but get much less attention in the resort's communication. Moreover, those projects that are mentioned are mostly reduced to their environmental aspects. For example, the Eco-Centro: it creates jobs, provides new economic opportunities, and saves costs for the local population. However, the emphasis when reporting about this initiative lies always on recycling and plastic pollution reduction. The same occurred in the interviews when talking about the swimming classes Soneva organises. While not knowing how to swim poses an immediate threat to life when living on an island, the resort representative put into the foreground that the project is "helping to nurture a love for the ocean" (*Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*).

## **5.2 Community Involvement in Implementation**

The community seems to take on a lot of responsibility not only in the brainstorming but also in the implementation of the projects. The island council acts as a link between the resort and the community but often the management of the projects is passed on to other groups in society. In the case of a recent waste separation project, a group of women was in charge as community representative explains:

For that particular project, we said we should have people from the community who will spread the word to the others. So, with that idea, we trained locals, mainly ladies - we call them Zero-Waste Champions. So, we call them for a one-day workshop, and we explained to them the ideas and the way to separate waste right. They then came up with practical implementation process and how to motivate others. (*Community Representative 3, Interview, April 2021*).

By constantly involving different groups of society in projects, it is ensured that the community as a whole engages with the projects and feels included.

Interestingly, it seems that as a result of the close cooperation, some community members have adopted the pioneering mindset Soneva displays in their brand communication (Soneva, 2019a, 2021; Soneva Changemakers, 2021; Soneva Fushi, 2021). The comment of one of the resort representatives: "We want to show that it is possible and once it is possible, then we can share it to the community. We can share it to everyone else, all the other resorts" (*Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*) is reflected in comments of the community representatives:

I think everyone [other local islands] gets approached [in the Maldives] but we started first because I believe that it is possible. What happens here is that people



do not believe projects are possible and then they wait to see if someone else does it and proves it possible. After [our island] ... finished projects, others [islands] approached Soneva. They just wanted to wait to see if it is ... real or not. I make sure to show to the other communities that projects are possible and work. *(Community Representative 1, interview, April 2021)*

We wanted to be an example for other islands to show that it is possible to ban single use plastic and open burning. Just as Namoonaa says: reuse, reduce, recycle. *(Community Representative 3, interview, April 2021)*

Both parties expressed pride to be at the forefront of sustainable practices. One community participant sums up the participation of a project regarding waste separation: "It was a wonderful project and the whole community was involved. We collaborated with the other islanders, and the council and Soneva so everyone was involved. ... so, there was a lot of collaboration" *(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*.

While originally, Soneva followed a rather top-down approach to development projects they now focus more on projects which build capabilities. A good example of this are the swimming classes. While the resort concentrated on teaching swimming to children and mothers directly in the beginning, they are now training swimming instructors who receive an official license and are financially supported by Soneva to teach others. "We're not just investing in infrastructure or the systems but also investing in people capacity building..." said Resort Representative 2 *(Interview, April 2021)*. Besides training swimming instructors, they have also "trained our teachers in a workshop which was then incorporated into the curriculum" *(Community Representative 2, Interview, April 2021)*.

Soneva furthermore holds workshops for their employees, regarding a wide range of topics not only related to work content but also for personal development, as well as the broader communities of neighbouring islands *(Resort Representative 2; Community Representative 1&3, Interview, April 2021)*. Workshops provide participants with information and give them the possibility to use the newly gained knowledge as they see fit afterwards.

### **5.3 Community Involvement in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)**

Neither the resort employees nor the community members answered the question regarding M&E in a clear manner, which is an answer in itself. The community

representatives' statements were rather vague and suggest a rough opinion poll rather than a defined survey structure to monitor the initiatives.

So, after every programme, they are asking for feedback, and we are giving them feedback. *(Community Representative 2, Interview, April 2021)*

This comment exemplifies the vague statements of all interview participants when asked about indicators and M&E. Another participant's answer to the question about the evaluation process indicated that if the local population does not like a project, they can reject it.

It is also mandatory to talk to the people within the community about these projects. So, they do have the right to say "no, we don't need this project, this is not good for us.". I think the people have the power to say no.

*(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

However, the person could not name an example where this has ever happened.

None of the other community representatives expressed a wish to be more involved in M&E. This could be attributed to a generally high level of contentment with what the resort is doing, or the local people are just not sure if it would bring any change with it if they would be more involved. While M&E would help the local people to hold resorts responsible for development outcomes accountability seems to be an unusual thing among Maldivian tourism businesses. Although several policies require resorts to include community development in their CSR, one of the community participants indicated that it would be difficult to hold the businesses to account:

There are a lot of ways resorts can work for the betterment of island communities. The government says that anyone who wants to develop a tourism resort in the Maldives needs to do some CSR for the neighbouring islands, but it is not happening in many areas. Often, they just give some donations but there is no continuous support and in-depth projects.

*(Community Representative 3, Interview, April 2021)*

The interviewee said this with resignation and a face indicating helplessness which seemed like there is not much room for action for the local population.

However, Soneva publishes not only a detailed yearly impact report but also provides detailed information about each project to the UN Global Compact and a range of occasional other reports which can be found on their website (Soneva, 2021c). This means that while a habit of detailed M&E exists it seems to be happening under exclusion of the community.

While no desire was expressed to be more actively involved in the M&E process, some community members felt that the information gathered by the resort should be more accessible to the community:

I think what Soneva needs to do is they have to be more louder. Because it has to be communicated via social media and via the news. There has to be more information. I did not know before that they had this Namoonaa Baa for example so they should make sure that they reach these people and show them what they are doing. I think that is something they could improve.

*(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

It was also mentioned that the communication about projects and the annual reports are available solely in English. Even on the Facebook page of the Namoonaa Baa initiative postings are not available in the national language, Dhivehi. It was suggested by a community member to do bilingual posts and to include subtitles in video postings so more people could understand. Besides excluding some community groups like elders from the information, the lack of reporting in the local language can also lead to confusion:

I think sometimes they need clearer information. I mean it's human nature in every community to be asking "what are we getting out of it?" That question "what do we get from this one" is something that we have to get right. So, I think that is something we need to deal with. ... I think it is very important to approach them over and over again to make them understand how and what Soneva is doing.... *(Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021)*

#### **5.4 Summary**

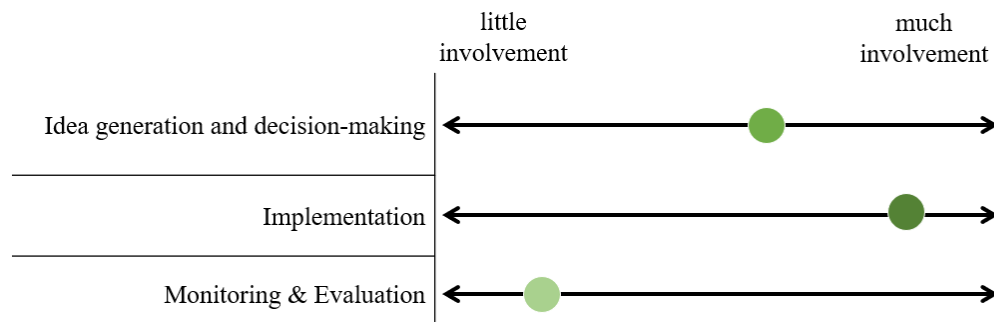
This chapter has outlined findings that are based on primary evidence from one particular resort in the Maldives. The chapter aimed to examine to what extent the community is involved in the different steps of community development projects. The perspectives of both community members and resort representatives were included, however, an emphasis was given to the community perspectives.

The first two sections show that overall, the community is an active partner in both the scoping and the implementation process of community development initiatives. All interviewed community members emphasised that they can actively suggest new projects to the resort. However, these are limited by the clear emphasis of Soneva on environmental issues. As a result, projects which focus on social or economic development are not voiced to the resort and development projects that could be

important to the community members fall by the wayside. When having an idea that aligns with Soneva's priorities the community members feel there is a little impediment to contact the resort thanks to the close relationship to a range of resort employees of all levels. The same contentment was shown regarding the involvement in the implementation of initiatives. The island council makes a point out of involving a range of different social groups, so everyone feels included and responsible.

Contrary to the decision-making and implementation steps the interviews showed that there is very little involvement of the local population in M&E. Instead of a structured review, feedback is sought occasionally and rather informally. Whereas no interviewee voiced a wish to be involved, more the general lack of resorts' accountability was criticized by one community member. Furthermore, the lack of communication in the local language, Dhivehi, was pointed out in this context.

Figure 6 visualizes the extent of the community's involvement in each step of the CSR process, clearly demonstrating quite good performance in idea generation and decision-making as well as implementation but showing low performance in terms of M&E:



**Figure 6: The extent of the community's involvement in key steps of community development projects (Source: author)**

How these findings position Soneva Fushi on the Development First to Tourism First spectrum, as well as how they can be understood in relation to other published research, will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **6 Discussion and Conclusion**

The preceding chapter answered research question 1 by outlining the findings extracted from the gathered primary data. How the findings from this particular case study examining one resort align or contradict those of other studies on tourism, CSR and CCD is the subject of this research report's last chapter. It begins by detailing the findings relating to the Development First framework by Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) answering research question 2, namely, where on the spectrum between Tourism First and Development First can Soneva Fushi's CSR can be positioned. This is followed by reflections on the resort's role as a private sector actor supporting sustainable development. The chapter, and with it the research report, ends with a section on future research possibilities and finally the conclusion.

### **6.1 Soneva Fushi's CSR: Development First or Tourism First**

The Development First approach advocates a way of business planning which puts sustainable human development at its core instead of solely neoliberal goals (Burns, 1999; Hughes, 2016). This is based on Burns' (1999) assumption that for businesses following a Tourism First idea "the over-riding agenda is always, without exception, growth" (p. 333). Development First on the other hand encourages businesses to move beyond the discussion of immanent and intentional development (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) and actively tailor the whole business concept around the goal of delivering development. But how does Soneva stand in this context? Is it just about marketing, maintaining good public relations, and cost-saving, or is it truly devoted to delivering development?

The resort and its employees do emphasise that Soneva's sustainability comes from a deeply rooted philosophy and not a business case. For instance, the resort writes on its website dedicated to its sustainability strategy:

We believe that a company's performance should be assessed as its total contribution to society. That includes the total impact our operations have on the natural world and on the communities in which we operate. Our rigorous monitoring and measuring of our performance informs our decision-making and enables us to be pioneers and advocates of environmentally and socially responsible tourism. (Soneva Changemakers, 2021, Total Impact Assessment section, para. 1)

This insinuates that the needs of the surrounding environment and communities influence the corporate strategy. Or in the words of the Tourism First - Development First framework: instead of the CSR strategy being based on a business case, the business case is built around the development of the surrounding environment and community.

However, the Maldivian tourism industry's business case is very much based on the natural beauty of small islands. Hence the main selling point of the resorts is having high class accommodation set in the natural environment of a tropical island surrounded by beautiful ocean. Furthermore, the island state is internationally known for exotic and luxurious vacation experiences and, ever since President Nasheed's well-publicised underwater cabinet meeting, also for their vulnerability to climate change (Hirsch, 2015). Simultaneously, the Maldivian tourism industry has to follow much stricter rules and regulations than any other industry in the country regarding environmental protection, employment standards, and product quality (Shareef et al., 2014). One could then argue there is a necessity for high-end resorts in the Maldives to be committed not only to an exclusive product but an environmentally sustainable one as well. Looking at the community development efforts of Soneva, such as the Eco-Centro, swimming classes or waste reduction programmes discussed in Chapter 4, which are related to environmental sustainability, these ultimately result in Soneva Fushi 'fulfilling industry expectations' (Hughes, 2016).

Scholars have found that residents show much more support for tourism businesses that display a strong social and environmental conscience (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Yang et al., 2013). While protests are not very common in the Maldives it has happened, that locals opposed a tourism project (Jamal & Lagiewski, 2006) and the one-island-one resort policy was changed due to the local population protesting as well based on the lack of benefits they were getting from this (Kothari & Arnall, 2020). This shows that even in the Maldives where businesses are spatially separated from the local population a social license to operate is good to have.

Furthermore, speaking from a Tourism First perspective, many of the initiatives included in the resort's CCD also help the business to save costs. Initially, one might think it is purely noble to employ primarily local people for the resort, but it also has a financial benefit for the company. Shakeela et al. (2011) point out that their "study identified disparities between local and expatriate employees' income levels with the

average salary of local employees significantly lower than that of expatriates” (p.251). While in managerial and administrative positions locals earned a third less than expatriates, in lower paid positions it was two-thirds less. Furthermore, the initiatives that aim to reduce waste on the neighbouring islands help the hotel to save more costs. To live up to the white dream beaches in tourism catalogues, the beaches of resort islands regularly have to be cleared of washed-up rubbish. If less rubbish is produced on neighbouring islands, less will be washed up and the hotel will not have to employ staff to collect it and then dispose of or recycle it (Abdulla, 2020; Kothari & Arnall, 2017).

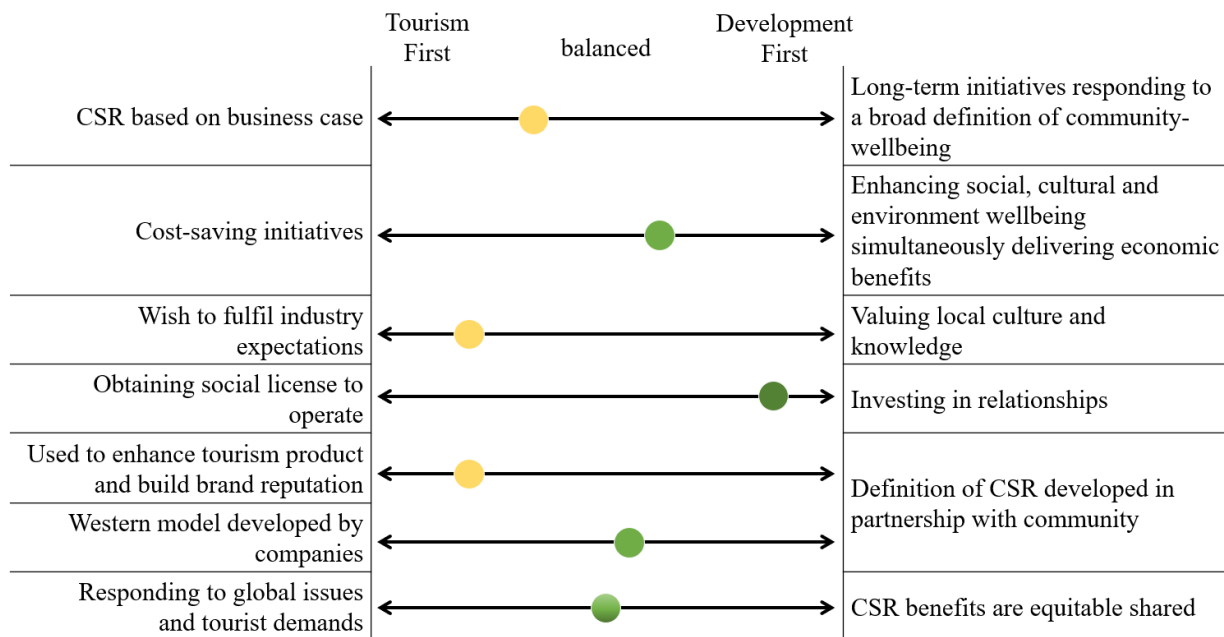
Soneva does use its CSR to enhance its tourism product and build a brand reputation but at the same time positions it at the centre of its practices. “Sustainability is not just a word that is being used but it’s a practice that annually is being checked upon and reviewed” (*Resort Representative 2, Interview, April 2021*). The SLOW LIFE philosophy is an example of how the resort integrates CSR into its brand and marketing. This strong commitment to sustainability is not just attested by employees but also guests (Robbins & Gaczorek, 2015) and community members (*Community Representative 1,2&3, Interview, April 2021*). By developing Namoonaa Baa into an NGO, they want to ensure even more independence from the business case: “we’re hoping that with the status of the NGO we can ensure our independency and making sure to have a continuity with the projects also” (*Resort Representative 2, Interview, April 2021*). In a nutshell, sustainability enhances the brand and gives it a competitive advantage, but behind it is a real motivation to change some conventional tourism practices and drive development in the region.

Lastly, Soneva Fushi’s CSR is not entirely based on a western model developed solely by the company but can be actively shaped by employees and the community. The resort holds regular meetings with its employees to discuss the recently turned-in NIBIs. Resort representative 2 (*Interview, April 2021*) explained in the interview that these suggestions and requests often concern the surrounding local islands as many employees come from there. Furthermore, the switch from rather top-down development to more capacity building initiatives means that local people have greater ownership of development outcomes. “We are supporting their ideas – they have the ownership so they can say okay, this is us – this is our idea to actually do this” (*Resort Representative 2, Interview, April 2021*).

While there are some projects concerned with local problems, the focus lies on global issues like climate change, marine preservation, and working standards. This again points more to a Tourism First Approach. However, the Maldives and its population struggle with a range of other issues like missing infrastructure (Kothari, 2014), health care (Badeeu et al., 2019), youth unemployment and an increasing drug problem same (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020) to name a few. This was also reflected in the propositions describes by almost all of the interviewees (even both resort representatives) who described social initiatives when asked what their dream project would be. It appears that the resort's self-proclaimed commitment to sustainability significantly sways the nature of community requests for assistance.

The above shows that while aspects of Tourism First can be identified in Soneva's CSR, it is difficult to assess if these are merely side-effects or if they are directly born out of the resort's intentions. This difficulty of clear classification to one approach was also noted by Hughes and Scheyvens (2016). That is why they describe the framework more as a spectrum along which companies can be ranked. Figure 7 was devised to visualize the research's qualitative assessment of Soneva Fushi's CSR among the Development First Spectrum. The green dots are used to show that Soneva take more of a balanced or Development First approach to 'enhancing the wellbeing of the community', 'investing in relationships' and 'defining the needs in partnership rather than applying a Western model', while the yellow dots show that their approach to 'CSR based on a business case', 'wish to fulfil industry expectations' and 'enhancing the tourism product and build brand reputation' is more aligned with a Tourism First approach.





**Figure 7: Soneva Fushi positioned on the spectrum of Tourism First to Development First (Source: author)**

Due to their capitalistic nature, most companies tend to gravitate towards the Tourism First approach (Scheyvens, 2011b). Soneva, on the other hand, can be situated further towards the Development First approach than most other businesses. However, they still lack a more holistic course of action in addressing the wellbeing of communities in all three aspects of sustainability.

## **6.2 Reflections on Soneva Fushi's role as a private sector actor in supporting sustainable development**

Emphasised by projects such as the SDGs or the Global Compact, nowadays the private sector is viewed as an important partner to achieve global development aims (Annan, 1999; UN Global Compact, 2013; United Nations, 2008). It is neither only about financial resources anymore nor just immanent development, but that to tackle the challenges of our time private companies must be equal partner. If done right the private sector has the possibility to improve the well-being of many through both immanent and intentional development initiatives. However, companies need to put a lot of work into these for them to be successful. They need to watch and learn, adhere to best practices and most importantly incorporate the local context and listen to those at the receiving end of CSR and CCD.

The reviewed resort, Soneva Fushi, does align its own goals with those of the international community. The SDGs were commonly mentioned by the resort representatives when talking about the CSR projects and the resort even released a brochure about the connections between each SDG and their projects (Soneva, 2019a). Furthermore, the resort group is part of the global compact and regularly releases reports on the alliance's website (UN Global Compact, 2021). However, Soneva is not a company that can be "steered" as Sachs (2015) wished for in his publication on SDG financing. On the contrary, the resort wants to take a leading position and be a pioneer in the field of sustainability not only for other industry participants but also for governments and international institutions. For example, a key environmental pledge of the current government is to ban single-use plastics by 2023 (The President's Office Republic of Maldives, 2020). Soneva outlines on its website that it is not just supporting this but took a big part in developing it:

Following meetings and workshops hosted by Soneva Fushi in 2019, President Solih of the Maldives made a pledge at the United Nations General Assembly for the country to become single-use plastic free by 2023. Soneva Namoonaa will continue working with the national government to broaden this pioneering approach out to the whole of the Maldives.

(Soneva, 2021a, Soneva Namoonaa section, para. 2)

The insights about the plethora of definitions for CSR and the finding that most companies only pursue sustainability to a certain limit described in Chapter 2 can also be applied to Soneva. Just as Votaw (1972) proclaimed, everyone has their definition of CSR. While the SLOW LIFE philosophy is a unique approach for Soneva, their CSR commitment has limits. For one, it is clear that many of the projects are only there to compensate for the resort's own negative effects (Martine, 2015). Sustainability on-site is applied to the extent that it does not interfere with the luxurious expectations of the guests (Moscardo, 2017). Cooling rooms, speed boats or huge pools are not renounced but rather built and operated as sustainably as possible and then equilibrated through emission offsetting in other parts of the world.

Soneva's strong focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability has been pointed out several times in this research report. However, the hotel is not an exception; many companies neglect the other dimensions of sustainability in favour of the environment. (Butler, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008; Neto, 2003). From a business point of view, this gives the resort a favourable competitive advantage since potential guests often focus on the

environmental aspect of sustainability as well (Robbins & Gaczorek, 2015). However, it also limits the resort's ability to holistically support communities in their development efforts.

Hughes (2016) points out ‘self-regulation’ as the first factor often limiting the potential for meaningful CCD: companies often agree to accords or voluntary codes of practice to avoid external rules and regulations but do not prioritise the agreed actions unless it coincides with their own interests. As the interviews have shown the local population is also aware of these limits and knows “which sort of projects [Soneva Fushi] would support and not” (*Resort Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*). As every tourism business in the Maldives draws on the image of the beautiful environment it often seems that holistic sustainability is not prioritised. The real motivation is preserving the natural resources that the travel industry relies on upon (Hall & Brown, 2008).

As for the second limitation ‘Reporting and practice discrepancies’ listed by Hughes (2016), Soneva Fushi’s record is mixed. The resort does have a habit of detailed reporting of not only on its own but also on the Global Compact website. All of the reports can be viewed publicly on the internet and do not have to be requested which shows a high degree of openness and transparency. However, section 5.3 regarding the involvement in M&E showed there is little to no involvement of the local community in these processes denying the local population a voice. Furthermore, even with a company that has woven sustainability in its brand so strongly, there are contradictions between its sustainability strategy and its core practices. These have been outlined at various points earlier in this research report like the necessary flights for tourists to get there or the high usage of power and water. It seems like not much has changed since Robbins and Gaczorek (2015) summarised Soneva’s sustainability practices as “beyond marketing gimmicks” but remaining a “work in progress” (p. 182).

Different propositions have been put forward over time how all steps of CSR can be more inclusive of local voices and enhance the agency of communities (Frynas, 2005; Ite, 2004; Murray & Overton, 2014; Newell, 2005). Chilufya’s (2017) recommendation to have more governmental presence in the partnerships to ensure equity and accountability. This requires a strong democratic system and trust in government; a context which does not align with the current system in the Maldives (Country Watch Incorporate, 2020; Shakeela & Weaver, 2018;). This links with the fact that ultimately

companies are not accountable to the local population but only to their shareholders and, to a degree, their employees (Mawdsley, 2015; McEwan et al., 2017). However, Chilufya (2017) also writes that “the presence of different stakeholders in the CSR partnerships is in itself a moderating factor of power relations” (p. 257). By founding the Namoonaa Baa NGO and working with other international institutions the resort is on the right track in this regard.

The often-emphasised necessity for successful development to incorporate local context and voices (Banerjee, 2007; Blowfield, 2007; Idemudia, 2011) has been the main aspect researched in this case study. It can be said that Soneva is putting a lot of effort into ensuring that the community can contact the resort about their own ideas and gets a seat at the table when the resort develops and implements new CSR projects targeting the community. The low barrier to contact the resort about ideas confirms Banks et al.’s (2016) statement that “relationships are central to whether communities will have the opportunity to effectively negotiate the development space and interface to their own benefit” (p. 257). Inequitable power relations resulting in the community being a “passive recipient” of development (Ite, 2004, p. 5) were not obvious in this case study. Nevertheless, they should make their projects more accessible for the broad population by communicating in both the local language Dhivehi and English this would help to make them “be more louder” (*Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*) and would also ensure counteracting another of Hughes’ (2016) limitations to successful community development: reaching the poor. The interviews showed that the council makes a point out of including different parts of the island community in the implementation and execution of projects. Nevertheless, it was mentioned in the interviews that community members sometimes feel ill-informed and are not always able to understand the benefits of a project (*Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*). Posting information online and solely in English does exclude groups of society that do not have access to the internet and/or do not speak English. McLennan and Banks (2019) warn against such exclusions as they can reinforce existing power and inequalities. While no current negative consequences have been reported in the interviews, unbalanced inclusion of different social groups can have long-term effects on local cohesion, livelihood, and resilience (Chilufya, 2017; Utting, 2007).

### **6.3 Future Research Possibilities**

In the context of this research, the community development initiatives within the broader CSR strategy of one resort in the Maldives was examined. However, a comprehensive examination of various island states around the world would also be interesting and important, as islands increasingly have to deal with unique development challenges. From this, individual recommendations for action for all tourism industry actors could be shown to the individual regions.

Furthermore, both a comparison to a similar resort in other island states or a different kind of accommodation business in the Maldives would be interesting. The former could shed light on how different social, political and cultural conditions influence community development practices while the latter might indicate a tendency of different business types to be more or less community-oriented in their practices (Scheyvens & Russell, 2011).

Overall, the literature review alone has shown that there is a need for more research on social aspects of CSR strategies in tourism but also other industries. Only if there is more knowledge and a greater presence of social issues of tourism will consumers be influenced to rethink their understanding of sustainable travel and sustainable accommodations.

### **6.4 Conclusion**

My intention behind this research was to look at the general CSR strategy of a resort but the specific development benefits it brings to local communities. In destinations such as the Maldives where mostly a small elite and international investors profit from the success of the tourism industry, it is important to take a closer look at businesses' CCD practices. These encompass both core practices which are carried ethically and responsibly and supplementary projects giving back to surrounding communities. Therefore, the investigation of such initiatives can help to illuminate how and to what extent the local population is profiting from the presence of the business.

Overall, the case study has shown that the surrounding community can considerably benefit from a resort being situated in close proximity. However, to achieve holistic sustainable community development outcomes companies have to make sure to

develop, implement and monitor community development in cooperation with the recipients, namely the community members. A range of frameworks exists which can assist companies in the assessment of their current practices as well as the development of a holistic CSR strategy. This research report made use of the Development First framework by Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) as it fits with the historic-hermeneutic view and qualitative methodology the study adopted.

It was found that Soneva Fushi can be positioned on the spectrum more towards the Development First approach than many other businesses. Many of the issues identified by other scholars as common mistakes made by companies in the execution of CSR and CCD initiatives are actively avoided by Soneva. For example, the hotel maintains a close relationship with the community members and makes a point of communicating with them on an equal footing. As a result, the community is strongly involved in both the identification of new initiatives and implementation processes. However, a lack of involvement in the monitoring and evaluation processes once a project has started and after it has finished was found. More conceptualisation of these steps would increase the community's ownership over projects further, build additional capacities and also strengthen accountability.

Overall, the community members are very satisfied with the cooperation and appreciate the fact that this particular resort is located in their proximity. Nevertheless, during the research two aspects crystallised that the resort could improve. Firstly, communication: To avoid exclusion of social groups as well as to prevent confusion, information should be provided in the local language Dhivehi in a place accessible for all members of the community. Secondly, the strong focus on environmental issues: to truly become a pioneer in Development First Soneva Fushi needs to approach development needs more holistically by “enhancing social, cultural and environment wellbeing and simultaneously delivering economic benefits” (Figure 1).

Focusing on just one company does not offer a complete understanding of the community development patterns of luxurious resorts in the Maldives nor of the general needs and wishes of the Maldives population. When emphasising how important it is for businesses that are conducting CCD to incorporate the specific local context to be able to produce meaningful development outcomes it would be quite hypocritical to generalise the findings from just one specific context. However, a single case study on

an existing resort was enough to achieve the aim and answer the questions of this research. It illustrates how practical CCD initiatives can be evaluated based on a theoretical framework.

Hopefully, in the future, not only the engagement of tourism companies in CSR will continue to grow, but also in the CCD sector. CCD ensures that communities also benefit from the tourism success of their country or region. In order to ensure that development is promoted that is close to the hearts of the community members, more focus should be placed on their perspective rather than on slick self-promotion of a company's environmental initiatives. Thus, to conclude the research report in the same spirit:

It is good that you talk to us. Like this, you get the real authentic information about what is going on. (*Community Representative 1, Interview, April 2021*)

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